

Virginia United Methodist *HERITAGE*
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Lee B. Sheaffer, president

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Edward Dromgoole's 'Canaan'

Stephen E. Bradley Jr.

In its concentration of sites that shaped the beginnings of American Methodism, few areas rival rural Brunswick County in Southside Virginia. One of the most significant is "Canaan,"¹ the home of Edward Dromgoole, pioneer preacher, confidant of Francis Asbury, and finally, landed gentleman.

A short distance south of Canaan on Virginia Route 46 is the site of Mason's Chapel, marked now by a state highway historical marker. Mason's Chapel hosted the 1785 Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the first following the organizing "Christmas Conference" and the first of the Virginia Conference.² On U.S. Route 1 north of Alberta another highway marker indicates the site of Ebenezer Academy, the first Methodist school in Virginia.³ The foundation of the old academy can still be discerned.

In November 2002 Dr. Robert Clary, a retired Brunswick County educator, led three intrepid Methodist historians on an exploratory trek to the long-neglected Canaan.

Edward Dromgoole's old home, built 1780-1784,⁴ is in southern Brunswick County near the Valentines post office, about three miles from the North Carolina state line. Dr. Clary was most kind to conduct us to the site of Canaan, especially since the rain and cold of a November Saturday greeted these audacious explorers. Dr. Clary drove and bounced us in his Ford Bronco, fortunately bumpers reinforced, because he foresaw that a few trees might be in the way. The ever-present pine trees of southern Virginia surround the location. Honeysuckle and other vines continue their destiny to absorb the signs of human habitation, returning the residues of human structures to the anonymity of nature. An outbuilding or two — perhaps they had been pack houses or slave quarters — teased us as we neared the old house. The house itself was seen clearly as if a futuristic invisible force field had been placed around the structure itself. Even so, one could not help but perceive with regret the neglect and deterioration of the decades.

The steps of Canaan are gone. Edward Dromgoole made his life here following his pioneer ministry. During his lifetime he made it a center from which the Methodist form of the gospel was spread. One might imagine that the sermons, prayers, and conversations that took place here influenced those who led Methodism in its second generation, and who in turn led the third generation. Now, though, the place no longer welcomes. Here, however, the Dromgoole family gave hospitality to early Methodist leaders, including Francis Asbury,⁵ helping to make this part of Virginia a nurturing place for Methodism in the American South.

The historical path from this home is clear; the physical path is not so easy. The missing steps made it difficult to enter. After some struggle in the rain and cold, three of us four did enter. What wonderful wainscoting in the large

front room! This material appeared to be about thirty inches wide, much of it unseamed and made of one plank. Someone had installed electricity years ago, so the sight of electrical conduits and ceiling fixtures grated its anachronistic features at us. Dr. Clary told us that the house, now abandoned, had for many years been a home for tenant farmers and laborers. The house was occupied until about 1965.⁶ Floor supports had given way in what may have been the dining room. We discovered part of the roof was gone. Surprisingly, however, much of the upstairs and downstairs remained dry and solid. Much of what we saw reflected the beauty and art of those craftsmen who worked when all tools were manual. Here it was that Edward Dromgoole lived for more than half a century.

Edward Dromgoole was born in Sligo, Ireland, about 1751.⁷ Born into a Roman Catholic home and reared as a Catholic, he converted to Methodism, which may have precipitated his leaving his family in Ireland to come to the American Colonies in 1770. In America he met the pioneer Methodist Robert Strawbridge, also an Irishman and a former Roman Catholic. In 1774 the minutes record that Edward Dromgoole was received on trial into the Wesleyan Connection in America.⁸ The conference minutes from the period show that he was appointed to the Baltimore Circuit in 1774, admitted into the Connection in 1775, appointed to the Brunswick Circuit 1775, to the Carolina Circuit 1776, to the Amelia Circuit 1777, to the Sussex Circuit 1778, to the Mecklenburg Circuit 1783, to the Bertie Circuit 1784, to the Brunswick Circuit 1785, and "Desists from travelling" 1786.⁹

Dromgoole participated in the patriotism of the day. William Warren Sweet, citing E. J. Drinkhouse's history of the Methodist Protestant Church, records that in 1776 Dromgoole was preaching in Halifax County. He was selected to read the Declaration of Independence from the steps of the courthouse.¹⁰

Francis Asbury placed great confidence in Dromgoole's ecclesiastical acumen. Asbury requested Dromgoole to play his part in what Sweet called "the first threat of division in American Methodism."¹¹ The controversy concerned the giving and receiving of the sacraments. Until this point in the Methodist work, it was expected that Anglican priests would administer the sacraments for Methodism since even John Wesley considered his work to be a movement within the Church of England. Still, in those days of 1778-1780 Wesleyans in America struggled to determine if they should remain a part of the Church of England or go their separate way so that they might provide a sacramental ministry.¹² The Conference of 1779 was accomplished in two meetings: one in Delaware attended by those from circuits north of Virginia, the other at the Broken Back Church in Fluvanna County, Virginia, attended by those from circuits in Virginia and North Carolina.¹³ Asbury expressed his anxiety about an impending separation: "As we had great reason to fear that our brethren to the southward were in danger of separating from us, we wrote them a soft, healing epistle . . ."¹⁴

The Fluvanna Conference, by noting the effective dissolution of the "Episcopal Establishment," laid the groundwork for a presbyterial (rule by council or committee) church government which had authority to ordain men to the gospel ministry, which ordination included the authority to administer sacraments.¹⁵ That year 1779-1780 saw the tangible result of the Fluvanna Conference: a number of men were ordained for the Virginia circuits and thus they then served the sacraments within their circuits.¹⁶ These events promised to divide the Wesleyan movement in America. Francis Asbury wrote to four ministers to help heal the growing wound: John Dickins, Philip Gatch, William Glendenning, and Edward Dromgoole.¹⁷ The situation, although a "near miss" in the unity of American Methodism, resolved itself in the Conference of 1780 when the Southern ministers voted for Asbury's proposed compromise "to suspend the administration of the ordinances for one year, while the whole matter was to be submitted to Wesley. . . ." Edward Dromgoole was part of this Conference of 1780.¹⁸

The Wesleyans in America following the American Revolution did separate from the Church of England, becoming the Methodist Episcopal Church. This formal action occurred during the Christmas Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, December 24, 1784 - January 2, 1785. At this time Dromgoole was second only to Asbury in length of service in the active ministry.¹⁹

In the following year, 1786, Dromgoole "desisted from travelling," locating in Brunswick County, Virginia.²⁰ Edward Dromgoole had married Rebecca Walton of Brunswick County by 1777, the date of the marriage bond.²¹ Rebecca Walton was the daughter of John Walton, a longtime resident of Brunswick County who had come to the area before the county began to keep records in 1732.²² By today's standards and expectations, it is amusing to note Asbury's comment concerning Dromgoole's circumstances. Asbury wrote in his journal June 8, 1780: "Edward Dromgoole is a good preacher, but entangled with a family."²³

Even though by 1786 he had settled in southern Brunswick County, Dromgoole was far from finished with the Methodist movement. Several times in his journals, Asbury wrote down that he stayed at Edward Dromgoole's home. The Conference of 1785 met at Mason's Chapel, some two or three miles from Canaan.²⁴ The *Minutes* show that the Virginia Conference of 1803 was to meet at Dromgoole's, but the *Journal* of 1803 records that the Conference was held at Olive Branch Meeting House,²⁵ again only a few miles from Canaan. Late in his life Asbury again visited with the Dromgooles in Brunswick County. During this stay, on February 12, 1815, Asbury ordained Edward Dromgoole an elder, since this office was not a part of the polity when he entered the itinerant ministry in 1774.²⁶ From here Asbury traveled to the Conference in Lynchburg, Virginia, held February 20, 1815, and which was the venerable Asbury's last conference in Virginia.²⁷ Asbury died March 31, 1816, in Spotsylvania County,

Virginia, north of Richmond and about twenty miles south of Fredericksburg.²⁸ Dromgoole thus remained active in a continuing ministry until his death in 1835. He was friend and confidant to the earliest and most formative leaders of American Methodism. We have discovered evidence that Edward Dromgoole, late in life, gave his name and influence to the Methodist Protestant Church, which was formed 1828-1830. Methodist Protestantism questioned why Methodists held to the episcopal office and objected to the threat of dictatorship by bishops within Methodism.²⁹ Sweet indicates that Dromgoole's namesake, his son Edward Dromgoole Jr., was a delegate to a "Conference of Reformers" held in Baltimore, November 1828.³⁰ Dr. Edward Dromgoole's name appears with that of his father, Edward Dromgoole Sr., in an 1835 list of unstationed ministers of the Virginia Methodist Protestant Conference.³¹

For now, Dromgoole's old home Canaan still stands, a sad but faithful reminder of times when early Methodist itinerants and leaders were nourished and encouraged. This is a place where the tree of Methodism established a root.

On April 28, 1974, some 200 local residents and guests gathered at Canaan. Two hundred years before, Edward Dromgoole had entered "the circuit-riding ministry."³² At this time a monument was dedicated at the previously unmarked Dromgoole cemetery. Dr. Robert Clary, mentioned at the beginning of this article, took part in the program of the day. "Many of the Brunswick County residents in attendance were impressed at learning that such a historic old residence still existed but had been forgotten."³³ Again neglected and perhaps again forgotten, Dromgoole's Canaan and its cemetery still remain, yet not even honeysuckle can obliterate the reminder that here lived one who was one of the greatest religious influences in the history of this nation.

Notes

1. Dromgoole and Lou Allie Heath, *Canaan: Home of the Edward Dromgoole Family*, 1973, pamphlet available in the Brunswick County Public Library, Lawrenceville, Va. Edward Dromgoole was the great-great-grandfather of co-author Dromgoole Heath.
2. Brenda S. Capen, editor, *Journal of the Virginia Annual Conference: The United Methodist Church 2002*, p. 251.
3. William Warren Sweet, *Virginia Methodism: A History*. Whitet & Shepperson, (Richmond, Va.: 1955), p. 306.
4. Heath, from the title page.
5. *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, Wesleyan Heritage Publications, 2002. A computer search indicates that Asbury stayed with Dromgoole a number of times. Note that the edition used for this article is produced by Ages Software under the title of *The Wesleyan Heritage Collection*.

6. Heath, p. 2.
7. "Edward Dromgoole," in Nolan B. Harmon, General Editor, *Encyclopedia of World Methodism: Volume 1*, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974.
8. Sweet, p. 94.
9. Taken from unpublished research by the writer of this article.
10. Sweet, p. 90; it is unclear to me whether this was Halifax County, Va., or Halifax Co., N.C.
11. Sweet, p. 79.
12. Sweet, p. 79f.
13. Sweet, p. 80.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Sweet, p. 82, using Philip Gatch's account of the Fluvanna Conference.
16. Sweet, p. 83.
17. Sweet, p. 80.
18. Sweet, p. 84f.
19. Sweet, p. 104.
20. Sweet, p. 95.
21. Microfilm of the Marriage Bonds of Brunswick County, Virginia, Brunswick County Public Library, Lawrenceville, Va.
22. Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants: Volume III 1695-1732*. Virginia State Library, Richmond, Va.; p. 353. The tract in this patent was bequeathed by the said John Walton in his will dated 27 Nov 1793 and probated 25 Jan 1796; *vid.* Stephen E. Bradley Jr., *Brunswick County, Virginia, Will Books: Volume 4: 1795-1804*, published by the author, 1997.
23. *The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, Vol. 1, p. 358.
24. Capen, p. 251; highway historical marker at the site.
25. *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, p. 813; this information is contained in a footnote of the edition cited.
26. Sweet, p. 151.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Sweet, p. 155.
29. *The Methodist Protestant*, Baltimore, Md., September 5, 1829. *The Methodist Protestant* was a weekly paper published by the Methodist Protestant Church and was issued under several titles after its beginning c. 1828; every issue of the fifty years that I have read will lead one to the conclusion stated in the text of this article.
30. Sweet, p. 185f.
31. *The Methodist Protestant*, March 11, 1835.
32. *The Brunswick Times-Gazette*, Lawrenceville, Va., May 2, 1974.
33. *Ibid.*