

## EDWARD DROMGOOLE—A PIONEER VIRGINIA PREACHER

By WILLIAM R. WRIGHT

In the year 1751 Edward Dromgoole was born in Sligo, Ireland. We do not know the names of his parents, but he was raised by them as Roman Catholic. During his early years he was converted to the religion of John Wesley, who founded the Methodist Church. After he united with the Methodist movement, his family and friends made his life so unhappy that he soon decided he must seek a new land in which he could worship as he pleased. He obtained a letter of introduction to Robert Strawbridge, a fellow Irishman and Methodist, who had sailed to America some years earlier and settled in the state of Maryland. There he was preaching to a land of new people who were much desirous of hearing this new religion of John Wesley. Dromgoole, along with his friend, Robert Lindsay, sailed for Baltimore in 1770. He was trained as a linen weaver in Ireland and soon went to work in Baltimore at his old trade. His religious experience was renewed when he came in contact with Strawbridge. Around 1772 Dromgoole began to give some thought to preaching. At the Methodist Conference held in Philadelphia on May 25, 1774, he was admitted on trial as a Methodist circuit rider. His first appointment was to Frederick Circuit in Maryland. Appointed with him were George Shadford, Richard Webster, and Robert Lindsay. In 1775 he was admitted into full connection and appointed to serve the Brunswick Circuit in Virginia, along with George Shadford, William Glendening, Robert Lindsay, and Robert Williams. The membership in Methodist societies on the Brunswick Circuit increased from 800 to 1661 during that year. Appointed with two others to the Carolina Circuit in 1776, Dromgoole and his companions reported a growth in number of members from 600 to 930. Later appointments were to Amelia Circuit in 1777, Sussex Circuit in 1778, Mecklenburg Circuit in 1783, Berte Circuit in 1784, and again Brunswick Circuit in 1785. His traveling as a circuit rider came to a close when he answered the call at the conference of 1786, "Who desists from traveling?"

The Brunswick Circuit to which he was sent in 1775 consisted of fourteen counties in Virginia and two in North Carolina, a distance of about 300 miles. He traveled over this circuit riding his horse and always taking with him his

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Bible, a portable pulpit, and some brandy. His ministry not only cared for the spiritual lives of people but the physical as well. He carried with him such books as *Cures for All Ills* and *Camp Meeting Hymns*. He also carried notes on sermons and a journal of his day's activities. These books are today in the possession of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill. It was said that no person could get a crowd together for a New Testament message quicker than Dromgoole.

Serving on the Carolina Circuit in 1776, while preaching in a church in Halifax, North Carolina, Dromgoole received a copy of the Declaration of Independence. He read it from the steps of the County Court House as well as from his pulpit.

During the years of the American Revolutionary War, Francis Asbury, the leader of the Methodists in the colonies, was forced to stay in seclusion in Delaware. At the Annual Conference of 1777, a committee of five was named to carry on Asbury's work. Dromgoole was one of the five. After the Revolution Dromgoole was one of the first to recognize the new government and signed an oath of allegiance to the new country. He always carried this oath with him and cherished it as an honored possession.

During the year 1783, he wrote a lengthy letter to John Wesley requesting more preachers for America and telling him of the great work here and the work of other circuit riders. He had also heard that Wesley was giving some thought to retiring Bishop Asbury. He asked Wesley to keep Asbury as long as he was able to cover the circuits once a year. The original copy of this letter, which was written May 22, 1783, and Wesley's letter answering Dromgoole, written from Bristol, England, on September 17, 1783, are also in the Southern Historical Collection.

In 1784, Francis Asbury was made a Bishop of the newly organized Methodist Episcopal Church. The Bishop was devoted to Dromgoole. In his *Journal* the Bishop mentions him often, deploring his encumbrance with family responsibilities, admiring his preaching as "heartily in good old Methodism," and speaks of preaching at Dromgoole's and of accepting the hospitality of his home.

One of Dromgoole's earliest converts in Brunswick County was Rebecca Walton, the daughter of a prominent land owner, John Walton, in the community that is now Valentines. Rebecca Walton was converted about 1775, and they were united in marriage on March 7, 1777. As a wedding gift from her father, they received a parcel of land containing 200 acres. On this tract of land they established their life's home, "Canaan." Canaan means "a land flowing with milk and honey." The plantation as a whole he called "Sligo," after his native home in Ireland.

During the year 1784, while Dromgoole was on a circuit preaching, one of his children, "Little Neddie," became sick and Mrs. Dromgoole sent a rider to locate her husband. By the time he was found and returned home, his little son was

dead. In a few days another child died. It was after this tragedy that Reverend Dromgoole decided that he must cease being a traveling circuit rider and devote more of his time to his family and help his wife, Rebecca, raise the children.

The first record of any merchandising in the Valentines community is due to Dromgoole. When he retired as a Methodist circuit rider, he settled on his plantation, opened a store, and operated a sawmill. Many of his old store books are today in the Virginia State Library in Richmond, and other store records and books are in the Southern Historical Collection. Entries in his books are made in pence and shillings. During the latter part of his life he was assisted by his son, Edward Jr., and later by other members of his family until the store was closed many years later. The old Dromgoole store building was the voting place for the Dromgoole Precinct until around 1890.

After he "desisted from traveling," Reverend Dromgoole continued as a "local preacher" to take the good news of salvation to many that had not heard it before. He saw the Methodist movement spread into the Carolinas, where he had sown the seed in his 1776 ministry. He found time from his home and family obligations to serve as a local preacher in nearby communities in Brunswick and Greenville Counties. And, in his latter years, he would sometimes saddle his horse and ride over his old circuit to see some of his old friends.

His home, Canaan, became one of the main stopping places of Methodist leaders of his day. It was a cherished place where many of the circuit riders could always stop and find lodging, food, and medical care. The medical care was provided by Dr. Richard Sweepson Sims, who married the oldest daughter of Edward and Rebecca Dromgoole. Bishop Asbury refers several times in his *Journal* to the services of Dr. Sims. Early in 1798 he spent several weeks of convalescence at the Dromgoole home. While sick, he records sitting by the window looking out across the snowy fields while Rebecca Dromgoole read to him.

Dromgoole built his own chapel or meeting house, that was called Dromgoole's Chapel. The exact location of this place is not known. According to Asbury's *Journal*, Dromgoole's, Mason's, and Woolsey's Chapels were all closed or consolidated into Olive Branch.

According to the records of the Methodist Virginia Conference, its first meeting was held at Mason's Chapel in May, 1785. In 1801 it met at Dromgoole's Chapel, and again in 1803 at Olive Branch. Many of the officials of the Methodist Church were housed and entertained at the Dromgoole and Mason homes. We can be certain that Dromgoole must have played a major role in planning for this first Virginia Methodist Conference as well as those that followed for many years. Bishop Asbury presided over all of these conferences, in which many of the major decisions and founding policies were decided.

Records also reveal that Dromgoole conducted one of the first Methodist class meetings in America. It is believed that many of those that desired to

become preachers because of his ministry needed instruction and advice in theology and that he taught them. Letters from various circuit riders reveal that he taught them in his class meetings. These letters are also in the Southern Historical Collection and are quoted in William Warren Sweet's book, *Religion on the American Frontier*, Vol. 4, pages 123-201.

Many of Dromgoole's converted preachers went to the states of Ohio and Tennessee. At one time he gave some thought to moving to Ohio himself to be near his friend and former fellow circuit rider, Peter Pelham, who had married one of Dromgoole's daughters. He once wrote Pelham, "We are still living in old Brunswick and nearly in the common way of the country. I often think of Ohio but can get no further than wish to be there." (See *Religion on the American Frontier*, page 151.) He once visited Ohio and bought some property there.

Reverend Dromgoole helped to organize the first higher education institution in this county, Ebenezer Academy. The records show that he and the Reverend Peter Pelham were two of the members of the Board of Trustees when the Academy was organized, some time between 1780 and 1784. They acquired 51 acres of land from Drury Buckner Stith on each side of Burch's Road near the present Wakefield, Virginia, for 26 pounds sterling. The Academy flourished under Methodist control for about thirty years, and then closed.

Bishop Asbury made his last visit to the Dromgoole home on February 12, 1815. After preaching in Dromgoole's house, he ordained Reverend Edward Dromgoole an elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and ordained two of the sons, Edward Jr. and Thomas, deacons in the church. When Dromgoole became a circuit rider in 1774, none of the preachers were ordained as clergy. Apparently he was absent from the Conference in 1784 when the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized and the former lay preachers were given the rite of ordination. Here in their old age, the Bishop at last conferred this sacred honor on his old friend.

Edward and Rebecca had ten children; the youngest, George Coke, was born in 1797. George Coke Dromgoole became a prominent political figure. In 1823 he was elected to the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia and in 1826 to the State Senate, where he served for nine years. Beginning in the year 1835, he served six terms as a Representative in the United States Congress.

Edward Dromgoole died in 1835. He had been a minister of the gospel for over sixty years. He had seen Methodism spread from only a grain of mustard seed in America to many states of the Union. Today, Methodists, and all those who love and appreciate the great work that the early founders did under many years of difficulty and hardship, look back with thankful hearts for the lives of the great saints of old.

As we visit Canaan, which was a mansion in Reverend Dromgoole's day, we still see the old home standing in the sun, rain, and snow. We can see boxwoods that he must have planted beside the walkway on which once walked the great leaders and fathers of the Methodist movement. Those wide front doors that swung open so many times for Francis Asbury, Jesse Lee, Richard Whatcoat, Peter Pelham, John Easter, and other many less known Methodist circuit riders, are still there, battered and worn after two hundred years of use. We see those small window panes through which Asbury looked over the fields while sick. Those wide plank floors and fireplaces, where once sat those great leaders who must have sung, prayed, and planned their daily work together, are still there.

Today the remains of the Dromgoole family are resting beneath the boxwoods in the old cemetery just a short distance from the home. Until the spring of 1974 there was not a marker of any kind in the cemetery to identify the family. Through the efforts of a third great-grandson, Dromgoole Heath, of Richmond, California, a large family memorial stone was erected and dedicated in a memorial service on Sunday, April 28, 1974. The stone is of granite with a brief description of the early family. Over two hundred people were on hand for the memorial service. Copies of the service have been printed and placed, along with other valuable papers of the Edward Dromgoole Collection at Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Although the family has been gone many years, the work of Reverend Dromgoole still lingers, and will forever. Among the Dromgoole papers in the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is a letter that Edward Dromgoole sent to a grandson, John Easter Dromgoole, on April 10, 1832. These sentences from that letter seem to be a summary of the writer's Christian beliefs:

"The way to worship and serve God is the same in all situations, and if we are honestly engaged, whatever name we bear we shall accept of him who is no respecter of persons. He is the common Father of us all and is loving to everyone and accepts the sincere efforts of all his children who desire to please Him thro' our gracious Savior. We shall always remember that he searches the veins and the heart, and we should aim at nothing less than to love Him with all our heart and be Israelites in whom there is no guile. If our eye is single, He will be our faithful, unchangeable Friend, whose love is as great as His power, and neither knows measure nor end. . . . Ty ever to live near to God for there is no safety but in His favor."