

The William Watters Foundation

By Myra P. Lindsey

The William Watters Foundation was established in 1996 to interpret, protect and provide upkeep for the William Watters Memorial Site, located in McLean, Virginia.

William Watters (1751-1827) was the first American-born Methodist itinerant preacher, receiving his appointment at the first Methodist Conference in America, held in Philadelphia in 1773. By 1777, all English preachers commissioned to America by John Wesley had returned home or stopped preaching, except Francis Asbury, who was in seclusion in Delaware. Watters took an oath of allegiance to the new nation, and is credited with playing a vital role in keeping the American Methodist movement intact during the Revolutionary War. He presided at the 1778 Methodist Conference in Leesburg, the first American Methodist preacher to do so. He helped avert a schism in the movement in 1780 over whether the Methodist circuit riders, all of whom were non-ordained preachers, should perform the sacraments of baptism and communion.

Watters' personal life

In 1778, Watters married Sarah Adams of Falls Church, whose parents, William and Ann Adams had converted to Methodism and had formed the first Methodist society in Fairfax County. Watters located in 1783, moved to a farm in McLean, and remained a local preacher until his death in 1827, except 1801-1806, when he served churches in Washington, DC, Georgetown and Alexandria.

William and Sarah Watters were buried in a family cemetery on the farm of Sarah's nephew, Thomas Wren. The Methodist Episcopal Church erected a stone obelisk monument at Watters' gravesite in 1892, recognizing him as the "First Native Itinerant Methodist Preacher in America."

Creation of William Watters' Foundation

In 1939, the Virginia and Baltimore conferences of the recently re-united Methodist Church held a memorial program at the gravesite to celebrate the long-awaited union of the three denominations and to once again recognize the significance of Watters' life and work. But soon after, and for many years following, the cemetery sat in neglect, during which time the stone obelisk was overturned and its surroundings were vandalized.

Finally, in 1965, descendants of Thomas Wren deeded the cemetery, a circular plot, 90 feet in diameter, to the Northern Virginia Board of Missions, which then handed ownership to the Virginia Methodist Historical Society. The Society had the monument repaired and in 1969, the General Commission of Archives and History of The United Methodist Church designated the gravesite Historic Site No. 7.

The cemetery then remained ignored for nearly 30 years, this time due to limited access. Finally, when the Wren descendants sold the surrounding property for development in 1994, the burial site became easier to enter. The William Watters Foundation was formed, an iron fence was placed along the circumference of the memorial site, and upkeep was given. Still, few knew of its existence because trees hid the cemetery from the nearby highway. In 2015, the Fairfax County History Commission placed a historical marker on the highway near the memorial site.

The work continues today. The Virginia Conference Historical Society, on behalf of the William Watters Foundation, will submit a resolution during Annual Conference 2018 to request

the General Commission of Archives and History and the 2020 General Conference designate the William Watters Memorial Site a Heritage Landmark of The United Methodist Church.

Jean Balcom is the president of the William Watters Foundation. The Williams Watters Memorial Site is located at 6430 Linway Terrace, McLean, Virginia. For more information about the site or to become a member of the William Watters Foundation, visit <https://www.vaumc.org/williamwattersfoundation>.

Myra P. Lindsey is editor of the HERITAGE publication.