

A CHURCH CALLED FREEDOM'S HILL



**SOUTHERN
WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY**

Central, SC

A CHURCH CALLED FREEDOM'S HILL

ON SOUTHERN WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY'S CAMPUS, CENTRAL, SC

by **Bob Black and Wayne Caldwell**

This is a story about slavery and war, about cowardice and courage, about the nineteenth century and the twenty-first century. This is **our** story . . . **our** heritage . . . **our** legacy as Wesleyans. It is the prequel to the modern ministry of our Church. Someone once said, "Who we are is who we were." This is who we were.

MENDENHALL PLANTATION

Near High Point, North Carolina is a fascinating relic of a bygone era—the broad-porched house and Pennsylvania-style barn of Mendenhall Plantation. Mendenhall Plantation seems oddly out of step with the busy world

rushing past it, but then it has *always* seemed out of step—even in 1811, when it was built. The Mendenhalls were Quakers and abolitionists—committed to the abolition of slavery.

It's not surprising, then, that a Wesleyan abolitionist from Ohio, on an anti-slavery mission to North Carolina, should spend his first night there in that house. Any opponent of slavery was his friend . . . and he would need all the friends he could get.

ADAM CROOKS

Adam Crooks was saved at age 14 and sanctified at age 16. As a young Christian, he was troubled by the silence of his church, the Methodist Church, on the issue of slavery.

Slavery was **THE** issue of the day. Congress was juggling the

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admission of slave states and free states to the Union, hoping to compromise its way to peace. America was literally, legally and precisely, half-slave and half-free. That precarious balancing act had been the law of the land since the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Slavery dominated the agenda of Congress and the conversations of most Americans.

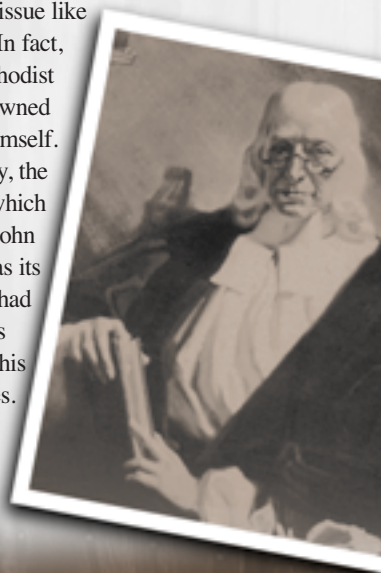
But the churches were strangely silent on slavery—not just the Methodists, but almost everyone else. Then a new denomination came to Adam Crooks' hometown of Leesville, Ohio, and their outspoken opposition to slavery echoed loudly in the silence around them. They were the Wesleyan Methodists, and with them Adam Crooks had found a home.

JOHN WESLEY

The Wesleyan Methodists were being faithful not only to their hearts, but also to their heritage, when they

took a stand against slavery. John Wesley himself had been one of the first in England to oppose the slave trade. His book, *Thoughts on Slavery* (1774), had been an early call for the Church and society to rid itself of this great evil, and the last letter he ever wrote was to William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament and an evangelical Christian, encouraging him in his legislative efforts to prohibit the slave trade and to outlaw slavery in the British Empire.

So Methodism, the church John Wesley founded without an explicit plan to do so, had an anti-slavery legacy. Their opposition to slavery should have been a given. It was not. Methodism had become America's largest denomination and didn't want to "rock the boat" on a divisive issue like slavery. In fact, one Methodist bishop owned slaves himself. Ironically, the church which saluted John Wesley as its founder had turned its back on his principles.



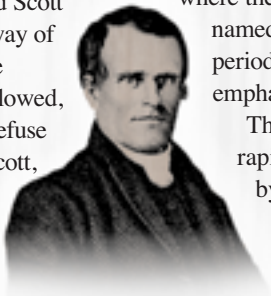
ORANGE SCOTT

One Methodist who had not abandoned Wesley's principles was a young minister in New England, named Orange Scott. He rallied fellow ministers and concerned laity in an abolitionist crusade. But he found many Methodist leaders opposing him. At the Methodist General Conference of 1836, one speaker said on the conference floor that he wished Scott were in heaven—another way of saying, “Drop dead.” In the annual conferences that followed, Methodist bishops would refuse to give abolitionists, like Scott, the right to speak. In the words of one Methodist historian, the bishops were “soft on slavery and hard on abolitionists.”

THE FIRST WESLEYAN METHODISTS

On November 8, 1842, five ministers (Orange Scott, Jotham Horton, LaRoy Sunderland, Luther Lee, and Lucius Matlack) announced that they were withdrawing from the Methodist Church they had loved and faithfully served.

In his book explaining why they were leaving Methodism, Orange



Scott gave two main reasons: the evil of slavery, and the oppressive hand of the bishops. There would be no slave-holders in this new denomination . . . and there would be no bishops, either!

Lest anyone fail to understand where they were coming from, they named their denominational periodical *The True Wesleyan*—emphasis on **TRUE**.

The new Church grew rapidly. Others were drawn by their passion for social justice in the name of Christ. Scott said on one occasion, “We are anti-slavery, anti-intemperance (anti-alcohol), and anti-everything wrong!”

They also boldly announced their intention, as a denomination, to disobey the Fugitive Slave Law which required anyone encountering an escaped slave, *even in the North*, to return him to his owner. This was an early example of civil disobedience, and those who took that stand were following in the footsteps of Peter and the apostles, who said to the Sanhedrin: *We must obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:29).

DEATH OF ORANGE SCOTT

Orange Scott died of tuberculosis and overwork in 1847, just four years into the life of the new denomination he helped to establish. Not only the Church, but also the nation lost one of its strongest anti-slavery voices. Historian Donald Mathews of Princeton and the University of North Carolina paid him that tribute. At Scott's funeral, Luther Lee said, "He lived in advance of his age." He gave his life to persuade the nation of the evils of slavery. We, today, are a nation persuaded.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The situation continued to deteriorate. Clouds of war loomed on America's horizon. In a famous speech, Abraham Lincoln said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Mark 3:25). Lincoln continued, "I believe this nation cannot endure, permanently half-slave and half-free" (meaning North—South). **Not all Southerners were pro-slavery.** In North Carolina, forty anti-slavery Methodists withdrew from their church. They had heard of the Wesleyan Methodists, and asked them for a pastor.



That was not a request easily granted. To be an abolitionist above the Mason-Dixon Line was one thing. To cross that line in the turbulent days before the Civil War was another thing. The risks were great, and the Wesleyans did not feel free to appoint someone to go. It would have to be a volunteer.

ADAM CROOKS QUOTE

An eye-witness account of what happened next on the floor of the annual conference in Ohio is recorded: "After a season of prayer, Brother Crooks arose, his cheeks as pale as marble. 'I will go,' he said. 'Sustained by your prayers, and in the name of my Savior, I will go to North Carolina.'"

Adam Crooks was now 23, newly-ordained, and single. He knew it would

be hard, but he had no idea how hard it would be. In the journal of his journey south, Crooks recorded that the road was rough. Dr. Roy S. Nicholson later remarked, "His road would be rough for the next four years."

"CAN YOU GIVE YOUR LIFE FOR THE CAUSE?"

In North Carolina, Crooks was labeled an outside agitator, a dangerous radical, and a traitor to the white race. He was also labeled a "disturber," one charge which was certainly true! He was tarred and feathered in effigy. He was prohibited from speaking on the courthouse grounds in Forsythe and Guilford counties (where Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem are located), despite the First Amendment right of free speech; North Carolina judges ruled that the constitutional guarantee did not apply to "True Wesleyans"! Interestingly enough, a recent book on violations of the right of free speech in the pre-Civil War South focuses on Wesleyan ministers.

Crooks was dragged from the pulpit and beaten numerous times. Twice he was poisoned—once by a false friend who said, "Your life is in danger. Come and stay with me." He survived an assassination attempt when armed men lying in ambush one day saw that he was not alone and decided against an attack. Through all of this, the question that

challenged him was: "Can you give your life for the Cause?" (Cf. 2 Cor. 11:23b-28.)

Adam Crooks came to North Carolina to build the Kingdom, and he began by building a meetinghouse near the town of Snow Camp in Alamance County. It was named Freedom's Hill because it stood for the freedom of slave and sinner alike. The congregation started the building soon after Crooks arrived in late October 1847. The church was dedicated in March of 1848.

It was a simple building, 27' x 36', erected on a foundation of fieldstones. The hand-hewn pews were constructed with pegs, not nails, and the church had no heat source at first. The windows were only shutters. Simple as it was, it must have seemed like a cathedral to those new Wesleyans who had prayed so earnestly for this day to come.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Almost immediately, the Freedom's Hill congregation began to operate a station on the Underground Railroad. That "railroad" had no trains or tracks, of course; it was a network of safe houses stretching all the way from captivity to freedom for escaping slaves. Routes to Ohio, Indiana, and New York were well established, with a major Southern terminus of the historic pipeline being the Piedmont

area of North Carolina, where Freedom's Hill was located.

Slaves were hidden under hay in a "friendly barn," sometimes in a false-bottom wagon, or in a hollow tree. One such hollow tree, less than a mile from Freedom's Hill Church, was used by two congregations—the Wesleyans and the Cane Creek Friends (Quaker) Meeting—to hide slaves during daylight hours and to help them escape at night.

Laura Smith Haviland



Other Wesleyans were active in the Underground Railroad, too. For example, Laura Smith Haviland was a Wesleyan Methodist from Michigan, who worked closely with Levi

Coffin, the "Father of the Underground Railroad." Her home was the first "station" of the Underground Railroad in Michigan, and she has been honored with a statue in her hometown of Adrian, Michigan. She worked among African-American refugees in Kansas, and the town of Haviland, Kansas is named in her honor. To us she is a hero, but, in the title of her

autobiography, she saw it simply as *A Woman's Life Work*.

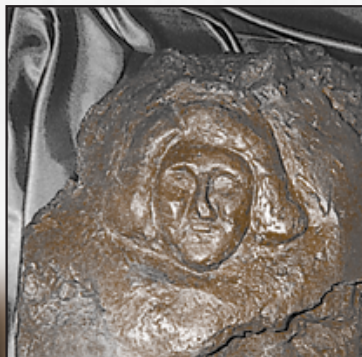
CLAY CARRYING

The February 1996 issue of *National Geographic* ran a fascinating photo of a face carved in the soft clay of a tunnel—newly discovered under a house in New York State. Experts quickly determined that the house was a station on the Underground Railroad; the tunnel hid slaves during the day and led them to safety after nightfall. They left behind mementoes of their presence there, carved into the tunnel walls.

That tunnel was under the Wesleyan Methodist parsonage in Syracuse, New York. The pastor? Luther Lee—one of the founders of the denomination.

COMMUNICATION THROUGH QUILTS

One aspect of the Underground Railroad only recently being explored has to do with "quilts," of all things. Plantation slaves communicated in a number of different ways. One of their codes involved quilt designs. Scholars call those quilts "fabric griots." A griot is an African community storyteller and keeper of their cultural and historical heritage.



Hanging out a quilt in the slave quarters must have seemed innocent enough to the unknowing slave master or plantation owner, but to the slave population it could send a message. The title of a recent book about those quilts says it all: *Hidden in Plain View*.

Often these messages related to escape plans. One design, called “Flying Geese,” was very popular. The direction of the triangle gave the direction of escape. Sometimes several triangles pointed in all directions! The *darkest* triangle was the key.

Another popular design was “the Drunkard’s Path.” This design was not directional but instructional; it didn’t tell them where to run but how to run. The message of this erratic design was: “Don’t head north in a straight line. You’ll be too easy to track. Zig and zag your way to freedom.” In keeping with this principle, the “stations” of the Underground Railroad were not arranged in a straight line, either.

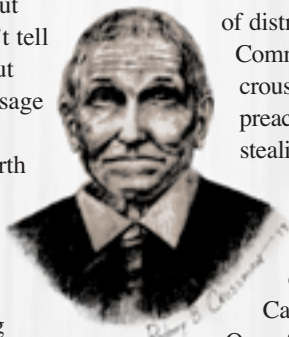
Still another design was the wagon wheel. For one thing, it symbolized movement and motion, and the message was clear: “It’s time to travel.” Also, a false-bottom wagon was quite often the vehicle of

escape. There may be, in fact, some connection between the wagon-as-escape-vehicle and the noticeable emphasis on “chariots” in African-American spirituals like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Good News! Chariot’s a’Comin’!” Possibly even the familiar spiritual about “Ezekiel’s Wheel” is a part of this Underground Railroad imagery.

MICAJAH M^CIPHERSON

Adam Crooks was forced from North Carolina in 1851. He had been arrested and convicted on the charge of distributing a tract on the Ten Commandments! It sounds ludicrous today, but early Wesleyans preached that slavery was “man-stealing,” clearly a violation of the eighth commandment. Even without Crooks, though, the Underground Railroad continued to run from Snow Camp and Freedom’s Hill.

One of its leaders was Micajah McPherson, a layman. McPherson understood what Jesus meant by the cost of discipleship. He was caught by a lynch mob and hanged from a dogwood tree on his own property, because of his Wesleyan principles. The mob returned to cut him down later, because they said they needed the rope to hang another Wesleyan. What they didn’t realize was that he was still alive.



Micajah McPherson

His wife nursed him back to health, and he survived to age 85!

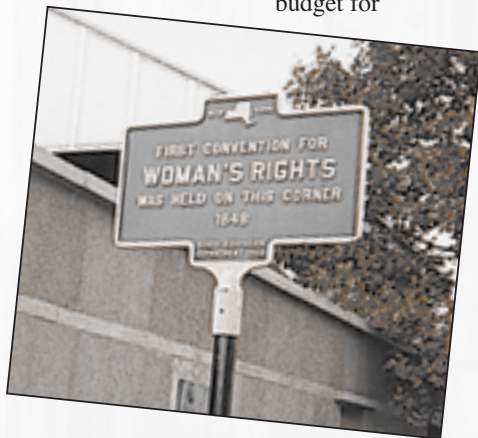
A gavel made for Dr. Roy S. Nicholson from the wood of the dogwood tree on which Micajah McPherson was hanged, as well as the membership roll from Freedom's Hill Church, are on display in the archives of Southern Wesleyan University. McPherson's name is on the roll.

SLAYES ON A SPANISH SHIP

The place of Wesleyans in the Abolitionist Movement was underscored in 2002, when the Oxford University Press published an important legal reference entitled *The Oxford Companion to American Law*. On the cover, superimposed over a view of the Supreme Court Building, is a painting that depicts one of the most historic cases ever to come before that court. It was the trial of the slaves on the Spanish ship *Amistad*, who successfully rebelled against their captors but were then recaptured in American waters. Should they be returned to their owners as property?

An American abolitionist, Lewis Tappan, funded their legal defense, and former President of the United States John Quincy Adams pled their cause in court. Lewis Tappan was a colleague of LaRoy Sunderland, one of the founders of the Wesleyan Methodist denomination. They were

both named on a wanted poster in New Orleans, and the price on their heads was \$10,000. Their crime: being abolitionists. After the trial, the *Amistad Defense Fund* became the budget for



the American Missionary Association, funding anti-slavery missions that included Adam Crooks and the Wesleyans who followed him to the South, in the days before the Civil War.

BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

Another issue was the matter of women's rights. The first convention held in the United States, for the rights of women, was held in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel at Seneca Falls, New York. In 1848, "women's rights" was not the radical feminism of today. If there was "political correctness" back then, it would be



Freedom's Hill Wesleyan Methodist Church
Albemarle County, North Carolina
The first Wesleyan Meeting House in the South
Built in 1848

Methodist roots.
Born in the holiness
revival of the late
nineteenth century,
the Pilgrim Holiness
Church became a
force for holiness
evangelism at home
and abroad. In
1968, the two
churches merged

against women's rights and not for them! The issues were "basic human rights for women," including the right to vote and, in some states, to hold property in their own names. It also involved the right to ministry. The first woman ordained to the Christian ministry in the United States was named Antionette Brown. Her ordination sermon was preached by a Wesleyan—Luther Lee.

Wesleyan Methodists were also the first denomination in America to give an equal vote to the laity in church conferences. It was the consistent application of a principle—the rights of slaves, the rights of women, the rights of the laity.

MERGER

Across the years, the Wesleyan Methodists made their mark among evangelical churches and particularly churches of the holiness movement. Another such church was the Pilgrim Holiness Church, which also had

to form The Wesleyan Church. They marched into the auditorium on the campus of Anderson College, Anderson, Indiana, as two streams of delegates, and left as one Church.

The dove and the flame in the merging logo of the Church represent the Holy Spirit and the life of holiness—the historic witness of both of the merging denominations. Currently, The Wesleyan Church has over 300,000 members around the world. More importantly, the commitment to holiness is still strong.

FREEDOM'S HILL RECLAIMED

Over the years, the congregation of historic Freedom's Hill dwindled in size, and eventually the building fell into disuse and decay. The last service there was held in 1939-40. The building that had weathered the attacks of its enemies also had to survive the neglect of its friends. In 1973, the pastor and people of Neighbors Grove Wesleyan

Church in Asheboro, North Carolina stepped in to reclaim this part of their Wesleyan heritage. Led by Pastor Richard Kindschi and Youth Pastor Mike Engle, they went to work and repaired the church as a labor of love.

The repaired church was moved to the conference grounds of the North Carolina District of The Wesleyan Church in nearby Colfax, North Carolina, where it remained in a place of honor for more than twenty years. The District Superintendent



was Rev. Watson Black, father of Dr. Bob Black at Southern Wesleyan University. Rev. Black saw it as an opportunity to partially repay a debt to history.

FREEDOM'S HILL RELOCATED

But when the conference ground was sold, the future of the church was again very much in doubt. Dr. David Spittal, President of Southern Wesleyan University (SWU), tackled

the challenge of preserving this historical treasure. Jonathan Catron, Director of the Physical Plant at the University, led a crew to Colfax. They carefully marked every board, disassembled the church, and relocated it on the campus of Southern Wesleyan University in October 2000. The old Freedom's Hill Wesleyan Methodist Church became the newest building on the campus.

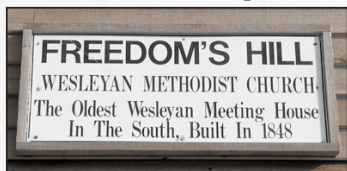
Freedom's Hill is now re-born. The building is both a restoration and a replication. Almost all of the interior is original—most of the walls and ceiling, all of the flooring, the pulpit, the platform, the pews, the lamp stands and the window sashes. The exterior, however, was more badly damaged by termites and carpenter ants than anyone had realized. It proved impossible to preserve most of it, so the restoration crew created a faithful replica of its original appearance.

One exterior feature was carefully preserved—the door, with its bullet holes, is on display inside the restored church, while a replica of it hangs in its place.



Landscaping of the grounds is now complete. The main feature is a prayer walk in the shape of, appropriately enough, a wagon wheel.

Freedom's Hill was re-dedicated at the SWU Homecoming in October 2001. Who would have thought in 1848 that this church would survive the decade, much less open its doors on the 21st century? Freedom's Hill still stands—but even more important is the fact that it still stands for the same principles it has always represented. It is still true to Wesley's dual goal—the salvation of souls and the transformation of society in Jesus' name.



“History is *His* story.” And His story never ends.

Bob Black
Religion Professor
Southern Wesleyan University

Wayne Caldwell
Historian
The Wesleyan Church

Central, SC, is located 30 minutes from Greenville, Anderson, and the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. It is two hours from Atlanta and Charlotte.

Southern Wesleyan University offers classes in Charleston, Columbia, Greenville, Greenwood, North Augusta and Spartanburg.

Directions

From Charlotte/Greenville

Head South on I-85
Take Exit 40 (SC-153) towards Easley
As SC -153 ends, head South on US -123
Continue South on US-123 for 16 miles
Take SWU Exit Road 18- (Mile Marker 4)
Follow the signs to the Campus

From Atlanta

Head North on I-85
Near Anderson, Exit West onto US-76 towards
Clemson
Near Clemson, Exit right onto SC-93
toward Central
Continue 8 miles on SC-93
Look for the signs for the Campus

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www.swu.edu/freedomshill
For details: 864-644-5191

