Bard of the Bethel

Bard of the Bethel:
The Life and Times of Boston's Father Taylor, 1793-1871

By

Wendy Knickerbocker

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5407-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5407-8

To my Mother,
because she liked sea stories
and also my stories;

and to David,
because he is a wonderful shipmate.

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PREFACE

Rev. Edward T. Taylor (1793-1871), known to all as simply Father Taylor, was among the best-known and most popular preachers in Boston during the 1830s-1850s. In 1835, after hearing Taylor preach, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal, “How puny, how cowardly, other preachers look by the side of this preaching! He shows us what a man can do.” Walt Whitman wrote a tribute to Taylor that begins, “I have never heard but one essentially perfect orator.” In a memorial sermon, the Unitarian minister Cyrus A. Bartol stated, “I must risk the charge or suspicion of extravagance, and call him the only man of my acquaintance to whom the term genius absolutely belongs.” Yet today Father Taylor is generally unknown.

Taylor was born in Virginia and orphaned early. He was raised by a foster mother and ran away to sea at the age of seven. He remained an illiterate sailor until he joined the Methodists and was licensed to preach. Taylor was ordained as an itinerant Methodist preacher in the New England Annual Conference in 1819, and for the next ten years he served circuits on Cape Cod and elsewhere in southeastern New England. His preaching success in general and his appeal to sailors in particular caught the attention of a group of Boston Methodists and Unitarians who were interested in ministry and outreach to sailors, and Taylor was installed as the chaplain of the Seamen’s Bethel in 1829.

He soon became one of Boston’s foremost temperance advocates and a tireless champion of sailors. He was a brilliant preacher who used the plain language of ships and the sea to convey the lessons of the Bible, and he was compelling enough that many prominent business, cultural, and political figures attended his services. The Seamen’s Bethel became a required stop for both American and European visitors; Taylor was the only Boston preacher Charles Dickens heard on his 1842 trip.

Taylor preached to Unitarian gatherings as well as to Methodist ones. Unitarian ministers and congregations alike were fascinated and inspired by the concreteness of Taylor’s language, his everyday similes and homespun metaphors, and his affinity for the wonders of both nature and human fellowship. Harvard Divinity School students regularly went to hear him preach, and Unitarian merchants were the primary supporters of the Seamen’s Bethel and the Boston Port Society, the entity that owned the

Bethel property and paid Taylor's salary. Taylor counted several Unitarians, ministers as well as laymen, among his good friends.

His close Unitarian connection made Taylor's Methodist colleagues more than a little uncomfortable. Methodists were staunch Trinitarians and they considered Unitarians to be heretics. For Taylor, the Unitarians had demonstrated Christian charity by their support for his ministry, and he remained unshaken in his loyalty to them. Although he remained an earnest and devoted Methodist throughout his life, Taylor was ecumenical in his ministry and his message. He kept faith with all those who would hear the gospel and held affection for anyone who cared about the welfare of sailors.

Taylor was sometimes out of the Methodist mainstream in other ways as well. Although the New England Annual Conference advised its members to avoid any involvement with Masonry, Taylor was an active Mason; he was twice subjected to disciplinary action by the Annual Conference. Some Methodists disapproved of a few of the revivalists and temperance reformers with whom Taylor associated. Taylor was also a loud opponent of abolition and abolitionists. At first his views were in accord with the New England Annual Conference, but as time went on many Conference members espoused abolition and Taylor became an argumentative dissenter.

Whether or not Taylor was an illustrious Methodist preacher, he was without doubt a beloved one. Regardless of his apparent inability to conform, his genuine and unstinting affection for his Methodist brothers and sisters was irresistible, and he was popular in every arena. He was active within the New England Annual Conference for over fifty years, and there was no corner of New England where he was unknown. The story of his career mirrors the growth of Methodism in Massachusetts and the involvement of New England Methodists in the social issues of the time.

As public a figure as Taylor was, his life story is elusive. Although he became an avid reader, he never developed the habit of writing. He kept no written record beyond what was minimally required for church business. He had spent his formative years as an ordinary sailor, and therefore he was schooled in an oral tradition of songs and stories. Methodist preachers were strongly discouraged from using sermon notes, and in that sense Taylor was a natural Methodist. His sermons were extemporaneous, inspired but not reasoned. Taylor was a storyteller and a rhapsodist, not a journal writer or an essayist.

It is truly unfortunate that none of his sermons or speeches has survived. His contemporaries frequently remarked that it was impossible

to transcribe Taylor's speeches or sermons, not only because he was a quick and animated speaker, but also because he was so compelling that even experienced reporters would stop writing when they got caught up in Taylor's words. I have provided several transcriptions from newspapers, diaries, memoirs, and travel reports, but it is likely that most of what was transcribed was in fact written from memory. While Taylor's preaching was freshest and most powerful in the 1830s and 1840s, most of the available transcriptions were made after 1850. Even though his words alone would not convey the full drama of his preaching, if we had Taylor's sermons from his days of thunder we could better appreciate "what a man can do."

All that we know about Taylor comes from second-hand accounts. Most of those accounts were written after the fact, and many after Taylor's death. Although it is often difficult to judge the accuracy of the source material, I have maintained a close fidelity to that material. I have liberally quoted from newspaper pieces, church records, and the writings of his contemporaries in an attempt to record the shadowy footprints of the real Father Taylor. To that end, when there was more than one source for a quote or an event, I have chosen either the earliest published source or the writer most likely to have been present on that occasion.

The last full biography of Taylor was written just after his death in 1871: *Father Taylor, the Sailor Preacher: Incidents and Anecdotes of Rev. Edward T. Taylor, for Over Forty Years Pastor of the Seaman's Bethel, Boston*, by Gilbert Haven and Thomas Russell. It was republished in 1904 as *Life of Father Taylor, the Sailor Preacher*, with a history of the Boston Port Society and four pieces by Whitman, Bartol, and two others included. Haven was Taylor's immediate supervisor in the Methodist church, and Russell was his son-in-law. Haven was much younger than Taylor, and he did not know Taylor in his prime. Russell was involved in the project for only a brief period, due to illness and then a trip to Europe. Although the book is invaluable as a collection of source material, it is anecdotal and laudatory, its accuracy dependent on the memories of its contributors. It was rushed to publication and basically unedited; consequently, it contains factual errors and contradictory material. Nevertheless, I have used it extensively, and I have tried to corroborate or correct its information where I could.

Because this is the story of one man's life, and because information on much of that life is scant, my account and analysis of the 1820s-1860s is an overview and far from inclusive. I have paid only superficial attention to many important themes and events. We know that Taylor read newspapers, that he was knowledgeable about current affairs, and that he

showed some interest in politics; we do not know his opinions on many of the issues of the day. I have provided what narrative I could find evidence for, and I have drawn inferences where it seemed useful to do so.

I have told Father Taylor's story as it happened, in the context of antebellum Boston. Taylor may not have been an influential figure in Boston's history, but in his time he was one of Boston's better-known figures. Boston was a culturally active and intellectually vibrant city; yet in such a place an uneducated former sailor was invited to speak in many cultural venues and before audiences that were often quite sophisticated. Boston's population was highly literate and deeply absorbed with religious concerns, and a Methodist preacher captivated people in every section of that population. Father Taylor's story would be very different, perhaps lost completely in the sands of time, if it were not a Boston story.

Father Taylor was a Methodist preacher, a sailors' missionary and reformer, an urban minister-at-large sponsored by Unitarians, a temperance activist and speaker, the pastor of a nondenominational church, and one of the stars in Boston's well-lit sky. The story of his life contains many of the themes of antebellum Boston's history: the spread of evangelicalism and religious revivals; Masonry and anti-Masonry; the Unitarian movement; temperance and other reform efforts; ministry to and social work for the poor; and the rise of abolitionism. Father Taylor's story is the portrayal of a unique and forceful American character, set against the backdrop of Boston in the age of revival and reform.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is due to three institutions. The Boston University School of Theology Library has granted me permission to quote from materials in the Collections of the New England Conference Commission on Archives and History. The Massachusetts Historical Society has granted me permission to quote from the Boston Port and Seamen's Aid Society Records and the Caroline Wells Healey Dall Papers. The Mariner's House allowed me to examine and to photograph several historical items in its chapel, library, and parlor. One of those photographs is reproduced on the book jacket.

I have received help, advice, and cooperation from a great many people: librarians; historical society staff members and volunteers; historians—academic, amateur, and accidental; various friends and colleagues; loved ones who listened to me anyway; and some innocent bystanders. To all of you, in case I neglected to say it at the time: thank you for your assistance, interest, and guidance.

The staff of the Special Collections Dept. of the Boston University School of Theology Library deserve particular thanks for their patience and kindness to an out-of-town researcher. I dropped in to stay for a week, several times over a couple of years, and each time they tried their best to make me comfortable.

Some others who helped me beyond reasonable expectations are: David Avery, Castine; Fred Brooks, Saugus; Capt. Michael Cicalese, Mariner's House, Boston; Donald W. Gardner, Jr., Marblehead; and an interlibrary loan librarian (unfortunately nameless to me) at the New York State Historical Association.

Finally, with humility and gratitude I acknowledge the generosity of Alfred Lawrence Ripley. Uncle Alfred was a lover of books and scholarship; it is my sincere hope that he would have liked this book.

CHAPTER ONE

METHODISM, MASONRY, AND BOSTON'S CHURCHES, 1790-1810

At an early age, the orphaned Edward T. Taylor left his foster home to lead a sailor's life before the mast. He came ashore a decade later in Boston, where he joined a group of impassioned seekers of grace. He found a permanent home in the large but intimate community of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Methodism began as a movement within the Church of England. Founded by the Anglican clergyman John Wesley, the movement was characterized by lay leadership, public prayer and exhortation, hymn singing, and evangelism. Methodist practice emphasized personal piety and the sanctified life, instead of theology and the Anglican order of worship.

Wesley came to America in 1735, and he preached in the colonies for three years. He was followed by the English evangelist George Whitefield, a friend and close associate. Whitefield made several trips to America during the Great Awakening, and he was both popular and successful. By the 1760s Methodism had spread through the American colonies, and in 1771 Wesley sent the itinerant preacher Francis Asbury to the colonies as a missionary. Asbury was a tireless evangelist, constantly traveling and preaching, especially in the middle colonies and the upper South. Methodism became particularly strong in Maryland, Virginia, and New York. In December of 1784 an American church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, was established in Baltimore, and Asbury was one of the first two bishops.

American Methodism was made up of small groups of people spread out over the countryside or scattered in city corners. Those groups, or "classes," were served by itinerant preachers who were assigned, or "stationed," to particular areas, called "circuits," for a year or two at a time. The Methodist Episcopal Church had a definite and functioning hierarchy, even in its early years and in spite of the isolation of its classes and the distances covered by its circuits. That hierarchy functioned as a

chain of pastoral guidance and the sharing of spiritual testimony, providing a personally felt connection from church leaders to class members. Because of this structural intimacy, early Methodists referred to themselves as members of a “connection” rather than a church.

The primary unit of the Methodist connection was the class meeting, and being a Methodist meant being a member of a class. Class leaders and stewards, who were lay men and women, administered the classes. Class meetings included the personal testimonies of members, commentary and advice from the leaders, and prayers and singing. All members spoke of their spiritual conditions, and many were encouraged to offer their own public prayers. Testimonies and prayers were often deeply emotional, and such intense sharing created a tight spiritual bond among class members.

As classes became larger, they were organized as societies, which may or may not have had chapels but usually had secured a place where worship services were held. Groups of societies were organized into circuits, often covering more than one town. Every circuit had at least one stationed itinerant preacher; those itinerants were the official ministers of Methodism. Presiding elders were itinerant preachers who had charge of districts, which were made up of several circuits within a region. Districts were then collected as Annual Conferences, covering states or larger geographic regions.

Annual Conferences were the main administrative units of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and they were governed by the rules of the General Conference, which was the national governing body of the church. The voting members of each Annual Conference were its itinerant preachers, although any member could attend the conference meetings held once a year. The main business of the Annual Conference meetings was to ordain itinerant preachers; to examine the character and conduct of every itinerant in the Conference; and to assign each itinerant to his station for the coming year. Bishops presided over the Annual Conferences, and they ordained the preachers and assigned their stations.

Bishops were expected to travel around the country as superintendents of the work and health of the church, as well as to preside over the Annual Conferences. Bishops were elected by the General Conference, which also codified the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The General Conference was made up of elected delegates from each Annual Conference, and it met every four years.

The itinerant preachers were the vital link from the class meetings through to the bishops in the Methodist connection. The preachers all began as members of class meetings, and the bishops had been itinerant preachers before they became itinerant bishops. The great majority of

early Methodist preachers were uneducated men with powerful personal testimonies of spiritual growth, and most of them had first been encouraged to speak in a class meeting.

As Methodism expanded and more societies and circuits were formed, more and more itinerant preachers were needed. Every leader, from class stewards to bishops, watched for young men with engaging testimonies and heartfelt prayers. Such young converts quickly became class leaders, and from that role they went on to preach as exhorters, who were lay people licensed to preach. Presiding elders encouraged popular or successful exhorters to become preachers, either local or itinerant.

Local preachers remained in one place and received little or no financial support from the church. An itinerant preacher was recommended to the Annual Conference by his presiding elder and then accepted into the Conference on a two-year trial. If he passed his trial, he was ordained first as a deacon and then as an elder. At that point the preacher was received into full connection with the Methodist Episcopal Church, authorized to serve communion and to administer all church ordinances.

Methodist preachers were not required to have any education beyond personal religious experience or any training beyond some practice in public testimony or prayers. There was a widely shared suspicion that education could be an obstacle to good preaching and a belief that abstractions or theological discussions were a weak substitute for emotional declarations of the rewards of piety and Christian living. The Church Discipline of 1784 reinforced this general distrust of education. "Gaining Knowledge is a Good Thing, but saving Souls is a better. ... If you can do but one, let your Studies alone." Methodists felt that the personal experience of conversion and redemption qualified a man to preach. He would learn from his older colleagues how to express his experience in terms of doctrines such as holiness, perfection, grace, or justification by faith. Still, the 1784 Discipline also instructed preachers to "read the most useful Books, and that regularly and constantly."[1] In 1816 conditions for ordination were changed to include some required reading.

Being a Methodist itinerant preacher surely had its rewards, but it was a difficult and demanding life, consisting of "arduous travel, bad weather, inadequate living conditions, and constant uprooting."[2] One New England preacher estimated, "I preached 4,566 sermons in 295 cities, towns, villages, school districts, and neighborhoods, in eight states."[3] While horses were often available, few preachers owned a carriage or even a wagon. A few circuits were able to provide a parsonage, albeit a humble one, but such instances were uncommon in the early years. Preachers and their families usually boarded with a family on the circuit. On large

circuits, the preacher would have to stay overnight in different towns several nights a week, leaving his wife with the host family, to fend for herself and her children.

An itinerant preacher's salary was set by the General Conference at $100 a year, plus another $100 for his wife, $16 for each small child, and $24 per older child under fourteen. Traveling expenses, including moving from one assigned station to the next, were the responsibility of the preacher. Salaries were funded by collections taken in class meetings and quarterly circuit meetings, and an allowance for food and board was to be included. In New England, it was common for the amount of the collections to be less than the stipulated salary and not to include any allowances. The son of one New England preacher noted that in hindsight

> it would seem almost incredible, that one of those faithful toilers ... should be able to make a decent appearance in public and bring up respectably a family of four children on a salary of three hundred—never exceeding four hundred—dollars a year. Even this small allowance was often part cash, part *promises*![4]

In the Discipline of 1787, Bishop Asbury defined the mission of a preacher.

> You have nothing to do but to save Souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this Work. And go always not only to those that want, but to those that want you most.[5]

Methodist preachers went wherever the people were and formed congregations where there had been none. There was no discernible difference between Methodist preachers and those that heard them: preachers were not better educated, better dressed, or better off than the farmers and artisans in their audiences. Personal and intense sermons were delivered by homespun men who were nevertheless fervent and charismatic, and those men stood as examples to their congregations that grace and salvation were available to everyone.

One Methodist convert from New England said, "I wanted to be a Congregationalist and be respectable. But I wanted the love and seriousness of the Methodists."[6] Methodist preachers showed that passion mattered more than literacy and that wealth and its trappings were distractions from more important possessions. It was not necessary to recite a creed or read a prayer book or explain a doctrine to give a sermon, or to hear one, or to be blessed. Methodist sermons were delivered in an egalitarian and down-to-earth style that favored experience over

abstractions. Methodism offered common folk a way to perfection and holiness by living a pious life. Ordinary people were invited to choose righteousness, and the invitation came from people like themselves. This equality of preaching symbolized the breaching of class barriers in a new world.

Methodism fit well with a broadening democracy, especially in New England. There the traditional, established church was the Congregational Church, the Calvinist church of the Puritans. According to Calvinist doctrine, all of mankind was depraved, and, as a consequence of Adam's original sin, every person was inherently a sinner. Through the capacity of divine love, God offered salvation to a chosen few who were elected to receive His grace; that concept was termed predestination, since the elect were predestined for salvation. Calvinist theology was complicated, and to many, salvation seemed arbitrary, awarded by a distant and unknowable God.

Methodism, on the other hand, emphasized free will and individual responsibility. Believing that Jesus' death atoned for Adam's sin, Methodists rejected the concept of the election of only a few people to receive salvation. Methodism offered instead the equality of everyone before God: access to salvation was open to anyone who would confess his or her sins and promise to lead a pious life. Such a welcoming religion not only attracted disaffected Congregationalists and the unchurched, it also complemented the desires of individuals to improve their positions in life. Methodism encouraged self-discipline and individual initiative and responsibility, and it offered an optimistic view of the future. In the words of religious historian Nathan Hatch, "increasingly assertive common people wanted their leaders unpretentious [and] their doctrines self-evident and down-to-earth." Those desires and an "upsurge of democratic hope" made Methodism attractive to many New Englanders.[7]

Yet Methodism had a difficult entry into New England. Wesley and the first American Methodists had been Loyalists during the American Revolution, and Methodism had been part of the Church of England. Even after the 1784 establishment of the separate American church, the English term "Episcopal" was retained in the name, and the form of church government remained hierarchical. Many Americans regarded Methodism with suspicion well into the nineteenth century.

Congregationalist clergymen in New England were strongly and loudly critical of Methodist incursions into their territory. The New England church model was that an educated and properly ordained pastor watched over his flock for many years, providing stability and order for his congregation and his town. Suddenly this long-established social order

was threatened by the presence of uneducated and unauthorized preachers who got people excited and then moved on.

The Congregational Church was the state-established, tax-supported church in Massachusetts. Other ministers were often fined for performing weddings and other services, which poor Methodist preachers could not afford. Congregationalist clergy also had control over which preachers used the community meeting-house, and they often refused permission to Methodists. Consequently, itinerant preachers held meetings and services in whatever spaces were available to them, including schools, barns, and homes.

Resistance to Methodists often turned violent. In one Massachusetts town, worshippers had to endure

> noisy disorder in the time of service; breaking of windows with clubs and stones; pelting the members, both male and female, with stones and rotten eggs; hooting after them; discharging firearms outside the chapel; [and] throwing offensive odors on the floors when the meeting was in progress.[8]

Methodist preachers were considered “incarnate demons” and “intruders into the land of steady habits.”[9] In spite of this resistance, Methodism did manage to gain an early foothold in Massachusetts.

In 1789, the New York Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church appointed the evangelist Jesse Lee (1758-1816) as missionary to New England. Lee had been Bishop Asbury’s assistant, and he was an imposing and charismatic figure, with a powerful voice.

Lee arrived in Boston in July. When he could not find a place to preach, he gathered crowds on the Boston Common. When the weather got cold, he was still unable to find an indoor pulpit, and he left Boston. Lee went on to Lynn, a coastal shoe-manufacturing town about ten miles north of Boston. In February of 1791 he established the First Methodist Society of Lynn, which belonged to the New York Annual Conference. Nine years later, in 1800, the New England Annual Conference was formed in Massachusetts, separating from the New York Annual Conference. The first meeting of the new Annual Conference was held, appropriately, in Lynn.

It was not long after the formation of the Annual Conference that Methodist camp meetings began in New England. Camp meetings were outdoor revivals held in fields or groves, with preachers and worshippers all camping at the site. Bishop Asbury wrote to one itinerant:

> I wish you would hold campmeetings; they have never been tried without success. To collect such a number of God’s people together to pray, and

> the ministers to preach, and the longer they stay, generally, the better—this is field fighting, this is fishing with a large net.[10]

The field fighting began in New England with a camp meeting in Hebron, Connecticut, in 1802.

***

There were sixteen churches in Boston at the time of the American Revolution: eleven Congregational, three Episcopal (formerly Anglican), and two Baptist. The first Methodist church was formed in 1792, and the first Catholic church was built in 1803. The Universalists had established two churches by 1810. Universalists were Christians who believed that salvation was universal: through the benevolence of God and the love of Christ, all people would be saved, regardless of their beliefs.

Within the Boston Congregational churches there was discontent brewing, which would soon spread out of Boston into the rest of Massachusetts and New England. Essentially the dissent was a rebellion of liberal clergy against Calvinist doctrines, especially predestination and original sin. As clergy and parishioners took their positions, the liberals were called Unitarians and the Calvinists were referred to as Orthodox. Since there were obvious advantages to being a state-established church, the Unitarians did not organize into a separate denomination for several years. Instead, individual congregations appointed Unitarian or Orthodox ministers and thus established their identities. Dissenting parishioners left that church and either joined another one or formed a new church, Orthodox or Unitarian.

The name "Unitarian" came from the liberals' rejection of the doctrine of the Christian Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. For the liberals, the New Testament "taught the oneness not the threeness of God, a Unity, not a Trinity."[11] Unitarians thought that Jesus was not necessarily divine, but "we believe that he was sent by the Father to effect a moral or spiritual deliverance of mankind."[12] Eventually Unitarian beliefs were summarized as

> the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.[13]

In 1803 William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) was ordained at Boston's Federal Street Congregational Church, where he remained for forty years. Channing was a 1798 graduate of Harvard College and a

liberal. Over the course of his ministry he voiced the definitive statements of Unitarian thought in his sermons, which were published and widely distributed. The defection of Unitarian clergy from the Congregationalist fold became institutionalized in 1805 when Henry Ware, Sr. (1764-1845), was appointed Professor of Divinity at Harvard. Ware was a well-known liberal, and his appointment signaled that Harvard would teach liberal theology.

In 1810, partly as a reaction to the liberalization of Harvard, a new and strictly Orthodox congregation was formed in Boston, with its church squarely in the center of the city. Edward D. Griffin (1770-1837), a professor at Andover Theological Seminary, was chosen as pastor and officially installed in the summer of 1811. Griffin was a spirited and often fiery preacher, and his strong Calvinist sermons made Park Street Church known as a bastion of Orthodoxy.

***

After the American Revolution, a form of civil religion spread rapidly through the new country. Masonry had been influential in colonial America; as a social institution, its reputation was enhanced by the fact that such prominent Americans as George Washington, John Hancock, and Benjamin Franklin were Masons. Masonry enjoyed tremendous growth in New England, especially in Massachusetts. In 1790 nearly forty percent of the Masonic lodges in the U.S. were in New England, and a significant number of them were in Massachusetts. The first American lodge was formed in Boston in 1733; in 1777 that lodge became the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, the administrative body for member lodges in the state. In 1795 Paul Revere chartered the Columbian Lodge in Boston, and he was the lodge's first Grand Master.

Another Boston lodge, the Royal Arch Lodge, was the first American lodge to confer the degree of Knight Templar, in 1769. Among Masonic groups, the Knights Templar were distinguished by their elaborate uniforms and ceremonious, quasi-military rituals. They wore large headdresses, dress swords, and special belts. Membership in the order was restricted to Christians who accepted Trinitarian doctrine.

With the exception of the Knights Templar, being a Mason required only that a man believe in God, be freeborn, and be able to earn a living. Belief in God did not mean one had to be a Christian; Jews and believers in other faiths were welcome. This religious tolerance appealed to a great many people in a time of emerging new churches and sects within traditional denominations. Many New England ministers were Masons,

and church leaders from most Protestant denominations participated in Masonic rites. Masonry's tolerance was part of the attraction for ministers, but Masonic lodges also encouraged their membership by not charging dues for ministers and by inviting them to officiate at meetings.

Masonry defined itself as a universal fellowship of religious men. The newspaper *Boston Masonic Mirror* reported the Masons' pledge as "a brother's welfare I will remember as my own," along with "the five points of fellowship" through which Masons "are linked together in one invisible chain of sincere affection, brotherly love, relief, and truth."[14] The Columbian Lodge was "built upon the broadest foundations of humanity, charity, and brotherly love," and consequently "all men can join its support."[15] To further encourage fellowship, Masonry declared itself apolitical, and its constitution disallowed political discussion at lodge gatherings.

Methodist ministers were especially drawn to Masonry. Its sectarian tolerance was a welcome relief from the opposition that Methodists often encountered, and Masonic fellowship provided a respite of social acceptance in an environment of widespread hostility. The popularity of Masonry in New England meant that many towns had Masonic lodges. An itinerant Methodist preacher who was also a Mason could easily meet new people in a new community. Furthermore, Masonic meetings were somewhat similar to Methodist class meetings, in that lodges monitored their members' conduct and adherence to the virtues of "meekness, temperance, piety, charity, and industry."[16] Masons were connected in a manner that echoed Methodism: at the Columbian Lodge, "one of the first lessons taught us in Masonry is that we are to regard ourselves as one family."[17]

Masonic lodges in Boston enjoyed strong support. Ministers, church members, merchants, clerks, and artisans were all Masons. The fellowship of Masonry transcended social differences in Boston in a time of growth and change. Some years later, when religious differences hardened and split congregations and social groups in Boston, Masonic fellowship was also sundered.

***

Before the American Revolution, the North End was the heart of Boston's shipping and maritime commerce. Ann, Middle, and Back Streets (later North, Hanover, and Salem) connected the city's central marketplace to the North End's numerous wharves and businesses. Many ship owners, shipbuilders, and merchants lived in the North End. As Boston's commerce

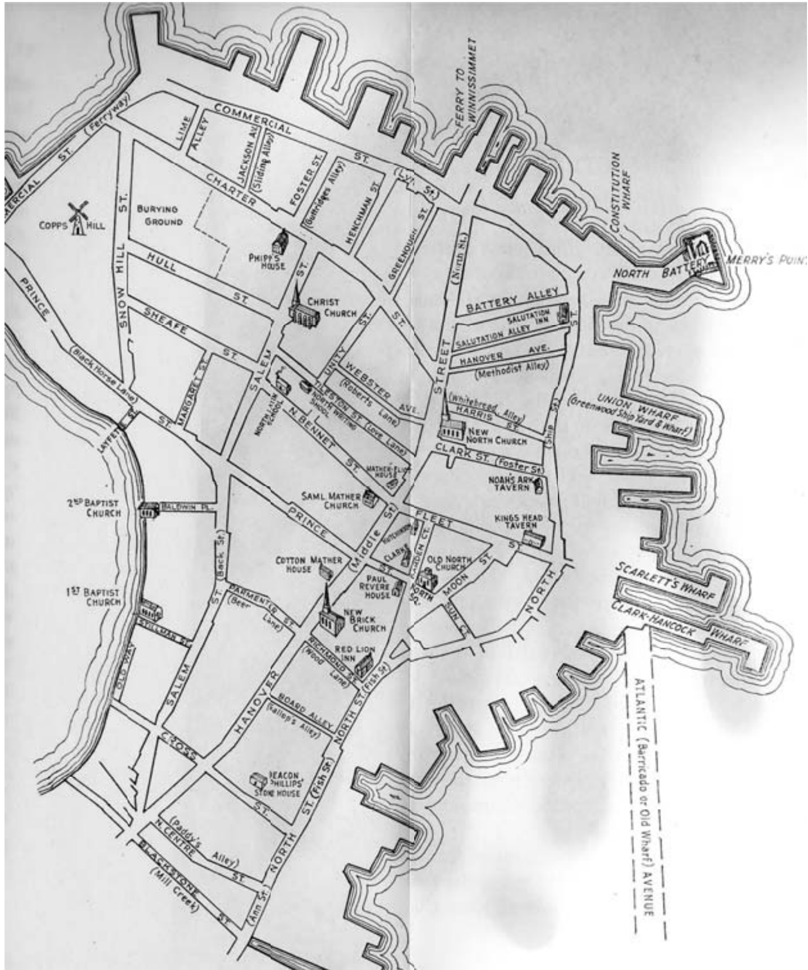

Figure 1-1. 1810 map of Boston's North End. From Annie Haven Thwing, *The Crooked & Narrow Streets of the Town of Boston* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920).

expanded, the North End added more warehouses and shipyards, along with the shops of maritime tradesmen and artisans. As more sailors and other transients came to and from the docks, more taverns and other businesses opened to serve them. Ann Street (later North) became less a fashionable street and more a thoroughfare of taverns and boarding houses. As a wealthy residential area, the North End began to decline after the Revolution. Some of the merchants had been Loyalists, and they had already left Boston. Others began to leave the busy neighborhood in favor of the quieter and more open streets of the new West End. The influx of transients hastened the exit of established business owners.

By 1810 the North End had become a less desirable place to live for those who could afford to build elsewhere, but it was still home to six churches. Two of them were historic Congregational churches that had become Unitarian. The Second Church in Boston, also known as Old North Church, was torn down by the British in 1775, and the liberal congregation rebuilt it after the war. The other Unitarian church was New North Church, one of the largest congregations in Boston. The First and Second Baptist Churches were also in the North End, along with a Universalist church. The chapel of the Methodist Episcopal Church was there as well.

In July of 1792, a Methodist class meeting was formed and organized into a society in the North End, holding its services in a schoolhouse. The neighborhood was well to do, and the residents objected to being disturbed on Sunday mornings. The fledgling church then moved to the upper floor of a house off Ship Street (later North). Members of the congregation were generally poor, and many of them were newcomers to the city.

In 1794, a wealthy man named Amos Binney (1778-1833) joined that congregation. Binney was a Navy officer and a Mason, a member of the Columbian Lodge. He would later be the Commandant of the Boston Navy Yard and then Collector of Customs. With Binney's support, the forty members of the Methodist society purchased a parcel of land in a lane that ran between upper Hanover Street and Ship Street (later North), not far from the docks. The lane became known as Methodist Alley, and later as Hanover Alley.

Jesse Lee laid the cornerstone for a new building in August of 1795, and George Pickering (1769-1846) dedicated the new chapel on May 15, 1796. Pickering was an important New England itinerant and missionary, "a man of marked character, and would have distinguished himself in any age." He was "a popular preacher [and] a sound divine."[18]

The chapel in Methodist Alley was a small building, measuring only thirty-six by forty-six feet. It was spare and unadorned, finished "severely

plain." It was built "two steps above the street," with no entryway; "the outside door opened directly into the aisles." Being located near the wharves meant a lot of noise and street bustle, and services were often disturbed; worshipers "suffered many petty annoyances."[19] One Methodist recalled that the chapel was a "little obscure place of worship" that even "in its best estate was mean and insignificant."[20]

The hardy congregation in its plain building managed to thrive in the North End. Membership grew from sixty in 1802 to 257 in 1806. That year the Methodist Alley church considered itself both large enough and secure enough to build a second chapel. The new building was on Bromfield Street, outside the North End and close to the center of the city, and it was dedicated on November 19, 1806. The original North End chapel, once again home to a small congregation, fell into disrepair. Five years later the New England Annual Conference authorized Amos Binney to solicit donations for its upkeep, and the old building remained in use for twenty more years.

In 1811, Elijah Hedding (1780-1852) was assigned to the Boston district as presiding elder. Hedding was widely respected, and

> his physical presence suggested power and authority, for he was six feet tall, large-framed, and corpulent. … In the early days of his preaching, it is said, he could be heard a mile away.

As a preacher, he was deeply spiritual, and he was made a bishop in 1824. He was "keen-minded, shrewd in his estimate of others, quick-witted, and of sound judgment."[21] In Boston, Hedding's powerful preaching from the pulpit of the Bromfield Street Church led to the conversion of a young sailor fresh off the docks. As Boston's Father Taylor that sailor, who revered Hedding for the rest of his life, would outpace his mentor in both preaching and converts.

Notes

[1] Don Holter, "Some Changes Related to the Ordained Ministry in the History of American Methodism," *Methodist History* 13, no. 3 (1975): 184-85.
[2] William Thomas Umbel, "The Making of an American Denomination: Methodism in New England Religious Culture, 1790-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1991), 166.
[3] J.E. Risley, *Some Experiences of a Methodist Itinerant: In a Ministry of Half a Century* (Boston: S. Hamilton, 1882; reprint, Phoenix, AZ: Holiness Data Ministry, 1998), 46.

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[4] Thomas W. Tucker, quoted in Mary Orne Tucker, *Itinerant Preaching in the Early Days of Methodism, by a Pioneer Preacher's Wife*, ed. her son Thomas W. Tucker (Boston: B.B. Russell, 1872), 5-6.
[5] From "Directions Given to a Preacher," quoted in Russell E. Richey, "Evolving Patterns of Methodist Ministry," *Methodist History* 22, no. 1 (1983): 29.
[6] Rev. Billy Hibbard, quoted in Richard D. Shiels, "The Methodist Invasion of Congregational New England," in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 2001), 268-69.
[7] Nathan O. Hatch, "The Democratization of Christianity and the Character of American Politics," in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*, ed. Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95.
[8] "Dorchester Churches: Fourth Church, Part I," *Dorchester Beacon*, Sept. 4, 1909.
[9] Richard Carwardine, "'Antinomians' and 'Arminians': Methodists and the Market Revolution," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 298.
[10] Letter to Thornton Fleming, quoted in Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism*, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 106, note 15.
[11] Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, Revised ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 158.
[12] William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," in *Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1901), 378.
[13] Rev. James Freeman Clarke, quoted in Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 161.
[14] "The Five Points Illustrated," *Boston Masonic Mirror*, Nov. 27, 1824, 1.
[15] Columbian Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, *Centenary of Columbian Lodge A.F. And A.M. Boston, Mass. 1795-June-1895* (Boston: Columbian Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, 1895), 26.
[16] Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Freemasonry and Community in the Early Republic: The Case for Antimasonic Anxieties," *American Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (1982): 546.
[17] Columbian Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, *Centenary of Columbian Lodge A.F. And A.M. Boston, Mass. 1795-June-1895*, 27.
[18] New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the New England Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston: David H. Ela, 1846), 23.
[19] Daniel Dorchester, "The Methodist Episcopal Church: Its Origin, Growth, and Offshoots in Suffolk County," in *The Memorial History of Boston, Including Suffolk County Massachusetts, 1630-1880*, ed. Justin Winsor (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1881), vol. 3, 438.
[20] Tucker, *Itinerant Preaching in the Early Days of Methodism, by a Pioneer Preacher's Wife*, 17.

[21] Harris Elwood Starr, "Hedding, Elijah," in *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1936), vol. 8, 497-98.

CHAPTER TWO

FULL CONNECTION, 1793-1822

Edward Thompson Taylor knew very little about his early years. His mother may have been Scottish and a governess on a Virginia plantation, but Taylor had only sketchy memories of his parents. He believed that he was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1793, and he thought his birthday was December 25. He was orphaned when he was around three years old. He was brought up by a foster mother, near Richmond.

In his later years Taylor said that even as a young child he was a preacher, giving sermons to his playmates. His daughter remembered him saying,

> When I was a very little boy, I used to kill chickens, so that I might make funeral sermons; and, when there were no more chickens or birds, I dug them up, and buried them over again. I was very proud and happy, when I could make the boys cry by my sermons; but, if words would not do, then I whipped them a little, for I had to have mourners.[1]

Around 1801 Taylor ran away from his foster home and went to sea. His first berth was probably that of surgeon's boy, or cabin boy to the ship's doctor, on a U.S. Navy ship. Then he shipped out of New Orleans with the Spanish navy, probably first as a cabin boy and then as an ordinary seaman, cruising the Mexican and South American coasts. He may also have shipped out aboard merchant vessels, and at one point he sailed again with the U.S. Navy. In 1811 he arrived at the port of Boston and came ashore for good.

Taylor's years at sea were apparently not remarkable. Although being a sailor formed his vocabulary and shaped his worldview, Taylor rarely gave any particulars of his life at sea. He spoke as though he had simply washed up on the Boston shoreline.

> I came to this place a little boy. I came from a Spanish man-of-war; never saw Yankee land; was a Southerner, a Virginian, by birth; and the Sea had been my cradle and the Ocean rocked it.[2]

No information survives on where Taylor lived or how he supported himself during his first year in Boston. He probably took a room in a boarding house in the North End, as did most sailors. Jobs as day laborers were plentiful: there was a lot of commercial and residential construction, and the city had several large-scale municipal projects underway. Perhaps he had saved his sailor's wages and lived on his savings. However he made his way, he was on his own, illiterate and unmannered, in a strange city.

One autumn Sunday Taylor was strolling around near the Boston Common. As he told the story,

> I was walking along Tremont Street, and the bell of Park Street Church was tolling. I put in; and going to the door, I saw the port was full. I up helm, unfurled topsail, and made for the gallery ... There I hove to, and came to anchor. The old man, Dr. Griffin, was just naming his text ... Pretty soon, he unfurled the mainsail, raised the topsail, run up the pennants to free breeze, and I tell you, the old ship, Gospel, never sailed more prosperously. The salt spray flew in every direction; but, more especially did it run down my cheeks. I was melted. I said, "Why can't I preach so? I'll try it."[3]

On another Sunday not long afterwards, Taylor heard preaching coming from the Bromfield Street (Methodist) Church. Feeling intimidated by the crowd, he entered through a window.

> I crept through the port-hole and stowed myself away upon the gundeck; but a heavy broadside from the pulpit stove me to pieces, and, in a sinking condition, I hauled down my colors, and cried for quarter.[4]

The occasion was an evening prayer meeting led by Elijah Hedding. After preaching his sermon, Hedding invited anyone who was "awakened" to come forward to the altar. Hedding's assistant was a young Boston native named Thomas W. Tucker (1791-1871), who had joined the Bromfield Street Church at sixteen. He was an active member, singing in the choir and assisting with prayer meetings, and a zealous exhorter. An obituary noted that "he was a devout, sunny, and lovable man."[5]

While Tucker was helping people leave their pews and go down the aisle to the altar, he noticed

> a roughly clad, and rough appearing individual, apparently a sailor, who seemed much distressed in mind. Approaching him, Mr. Tucker kindly urged him to go forward with the other inquirers and kneel at the altar. Though rather reluctant at first, he finally yielded.[6]