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Of Circuit Riders and Circuit Courts: A Case Study of the Methodist Border Conflict in Antebellum Virginia

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Of Circuit Riders and Circuit Courts:
A Case Study of the Methodist Border Conflict in Antebellum Virginia

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ABSTRACT

In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States at that time (and the main forerunner of today’s United Methodist Church), divided over the issue of slavery. The separate denominations that resulted – the M. E. Church and the M. E. Church, South – were separated by a border that stretched some 1,200 miles, a good portion of which passed through the state of Virginia. That border not only marked the geographical division of rival denominations (for they had indeed become rivals), but provoked internal division over denominational sympathies within many Methodist societies that lay along its path.

This thesis considers the impact of the larger schism upon one such society. The congregation in Harrisonburg, Virginia lay within the jurisdiction of the northern church, just twenty miles from the boundary line that separated the two Methodist bodies. Most of its members wanted to go over to the southern church where they were confident they would find refuge from the growing abolitionist movement in the north. A minority remained loyal to the northern church, hoping for a continued tolerance of slaveholding within that institution and refusing to endorse a religious schism that was widely thought to threaten the nation’s fragile political union.

In placing the focus on a local congregation and giving voice to some of its individual members and leaders, I hope to show that an otherwise familiar pattern of north-south conflict could entail something far more complicated than the bigger picture of antebellum religious schism might suggest. For within that pattern as traced in Harrisonburg can be discerned slaveholders and anti-abolitionists who favored the northern church as well as advocates for the southern church with emancipationist backgrounds. While these individuals in themselves may lay claim to little or no larger historical significance, they serve here to signify the complexity often hidden within the formulation of historical generalities.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements  
Section 1. Introduction  
Section 2. The Line of Division  
Section 3. Obliged to be North or South  
Section 4. A Thorough-going Body of Anti-Slavery Men  
Section 5. Contending for Adverse Principles  
Section 6. The Sentiment of All True Americans  
Section 7. The Rapacious Juggernaut of Northern Fanaticism  
Section 8. Oneness of Feeling  
Section 9. A Missionary Field for the South  
Section 10. Into the Battle  
Section 11. Much Confusion if Not Absurdity  
Section 12. Conclusion  
Bibliography
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Introduction

By the fall of 1847, the sundering of the Methodist Episcopal Church over slavery more than two years earlier had long since drawn the Methodist society in Harrisonburg, Virginia into its own partisan conflict. One of many congregations that lay on or near the border demarcating the now separate Methodist denominations, its members had wasted little time settling into two opposing camps. One group remained faithful to the northern church, which retained the original denominational name, and within whose borders Harrisonburg lay at the time of the split. The other group sided with the newly formed southern church, officially named the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, whose border with the northern church lay just twenty miles to the east, along the edge of the Shenandoah Valley. Just as the wider division of Methodism would incur a judicial contest over property, as the southern church attempted to defend its stake in the Methodist publishing arm known as the Book Concern, the two sides in Harrisonburg were about to wage their own legal battle over church property. The southern party, accounting for a majority of the members, had taken control of the meeting house, turning the pulpit over to a preacher from the M. E. Church, South. In retaliation, two members of the northern party, John R. Plecker and John S. Effinger, filed a bill with the Circuit Superior Court of Law and Chancery in and for Rockingham County charging the church’s seven trustees, all but one of whom were in the southern camp, with “perverting their trust,” alleging that they sought “only to gratify their own predilections in the pretended discharge of their duty.” Plecker and Effinger, on behalf of fellow members who were “without relief ... save in this honorable court,” prayed that the court would either replace the trustees or otherwise “cause the trust to be executed according to the
true intent thereof.”\(^1\) From their perspective, this meant nothing less than granting the northern members exclusive control over all church property on behalf of the M. E. Church.

Was the Harrisonburg controversy essentially a local manifestation of the broader conflict that had divided the Methodist Episcopal Church? Allowing for a range of views on either side of the slavery issue, that conflict could fairly be described as one between antislavery and proslavery forces. But as one contemporary observer noted: “I see no difference between the two branches of the Methodist Church in the [Shenandoah] Valley. Members of both branches own slaves. Under certain conditions of humanity, both buy and sell negroes.”\(^2\) Indeed, wherever votaries of each branch coexisted within slave territory, as they did in Harrisonburg, any contention between them was likely to have less to do with opposing positions on slavery than with opposing perceptions of the M.E. Church's position on slavery. Those who favored a continued connection with the northern church held out hope that the M. E. Church would stick to a pragmatic policy toward slaveholding despite its official objections to slavery, appreciating not only the legal impediments to manumission, but the threat, it was supposed, of wholesale emancipation to the safety and welfare of whites and blacks alike. Those who favored a connection with the southern church believed that an abolitionist spirit had overtaken the M. E. Church, portending the exclusion of slaveholders from its ranks and betraying its complicity in a movement effectively calculated to visit chaos upon the South.


Methodist societies along the new ecclesiastical border were allowed to choose an affiliation with either the northern or southern church in accordance with the so-called Plan of Separation adopted by the M. E. Church before it divided. Given the sentiments that provoked that division, a choice for the northern church may seem to have been, in many cases, a striking incongruity. In northeastern Virginia’s Fauquier County, for example, two congregations on the northern side of the border went to court in property disputes nearly identical to the one at Harrisonburg. In each case, litigants representing the northern Methodists included slaveholders. Four northern-aligned trustees in one of these cases owned nearly fifty slaves between them. In Parkersburg, now in West Virginia, the southern party took over the embattled Methodist church without recourse to legal action. As historian Edward Crowther noted, they “had no desire to permit a judge to decide the fate of the meetinghouse, which was legally the property of the Ohio annual conference, a staunch affiliate of northern, antislavery Methodism.” But did the “northern” Methodists in the vicinity of Parkersburg necessarily embrace an antislavery position? It is perhaps revealing that the presiding elder, or highest ranking clergyman, of the Methodist district that included Parkersburg was charged by the M. E. Church in 1851 with selling a slave he had inherited rather than manumitting her as required by

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church law. Moreover, the presiding elder of the nearby Clarksburg District of the same northern “antislavery” conference was known to be a slaveholder. Perhaps the best known north-south conflict within a Methodist border church took place in Maysville, Kentucky in 1845. John Armstrong, a wealthy local merchant, brought suit against the southern party who had taken over the church there. He had largely financed the construction of the church building and undoubtedly felt a strong sense of personal entitlement. Fighting on the side of the northern church, he was also a slaveholder.

In these instances, the dynamics of schism operating on the local level were clearly very different from those that split the M. E. Church in two. As for Harrisonburg, it would certainly be a mistake to assume that the controversy there arose from any materially conflicting views on slavery or abolitionism. Yet such a mistake could easily be made. In reading one historian who has singled out the southern party in Harrisonburg as the “proslavery Methodists,” for example, one might readily infer that the northern party embraced an *antislavery* position if unaware of that party’s opposition “to all agitation upon the Subject of Slavery” and the fact that at least two of its members (including the northern spokesman Effinger) were slaveholders. The Library of Virginia, in its guide to the manuscript collection that includes the Harrisonburg lawsuit, is more explicitly misleading in noting that the case would determine whether the “northern anti-

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6 “Western Virginia Conference,” *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 26, 1855, American Periodicals Series.
slavery or southern pro-slavery” side would be allowed access to the church. It could be argued that the southern party at Harrisonburg had a greater vested interest in defending the perceived rights of slaveholders. Based on the identifiable members of each party, slaveholding seems to have been significantly better represented among the southern partisans. But in principle, the dispute seems to have had nothing to do with differences over slavery. Instead, it grew out of conflicting perceptions of the northern church.

For members of the Harrisonburg congregation, the northern church was most immediately identified with the Baltimore Annual Conference, so named for the annual assembly of its itinerant preachers who collectively formed the governing authority of this highest order geographical subdivision of the M. E. Church. One of several annual conferences individually encompassing both free and slave territory, it comprised portions of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. Its circuitous southern boundary, winding its way through the state of Virginia, formed a border with the M. E. Church, South stretching nearly 300 miles. Beginning in the east on the Chesapeake Bay, it ran the length of the Rappahannock River to the Blue Ridge Mountains and then followed a southwestern course along the crest of the Blue Ridge almost to the North Carolina border. The transformation of this boundary from a structural joint connecting the Baltimore Conference to the neighboring Virginia Conference (now a part of the M. E. Church, South) into a barrier separating two rival denominations had compelled the partisan alignment of those Methodists living in its vicinity. In Harrisonburg, the southern party was convinced that the Baltimore Conference had thrown in its lot with northern abolitionists. They refused to lend tacit support to a subversive cause that they believed threatened ruin for the South. The northern party held out hope that the
conference would remain committed to the rights of slaveholders. They refused to endorse a religious schism that they almost certainly believed threatened the integrity of the nation’s already fragile political fabric.

While the denominational schism would generate distrust and animosity back and forth across the far-flung sectional divide, the Harrisonburg case illustrates how it could locally drive a wedge of antipathy through a once close-knit body of believers, alienating neighbors and erstwhile spiritual coworkers, despite their essential like-mindedness concerning the proper relation between the church and the civil institution of slavery. In placing the focus on a local Methodist society and giving voice to some of its individual members and leaders, I hope to show that an otherwise familiar pattern of north-south conflict could entail something far more complicated than the bigger picture of antebellum religious schism might suggest. For within that pattern as traced in Harrisonburg can be discerned slaveholders and anti-abolitionists who favored the northern church as well as advocates for the southern church with emancipationist backgrounds. While these individuals in themselves may lay claim to little or no larger historical significance, they serve here to signify the complexity often hidden within the formulation of historical generalities.

At the same time, I believe the Harrisonburg case has intrinsic value as an instance of a story largely untold. With the exception of the relatively complete account of the Methodist church case in Maysville, Kentucky, drawn up and published in 1848 by the lawyers on both sides of that legal battle over church property between southern and northern disputants, no narrative account of a Methodist border conflict has, to my
knowledge, been published. Only brief references to such incidents are to be found in the secondary literature. The following study thus aspires to fill a small historiographical gap. By combining court records with supporting primary source materials, including personal correspondence, church records, newspaper articles and published first-hand narratives, it has been possible to construct an uncommonly intimate view of the destructive impact of the larger Methodist rupture upon a local church community.

The Line of Division

From its very establishment in 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church had wrestled with the issue of slavery. In the first publication of its rules and regulations, otherwise known as the Discipline (later published, with periodic revisions, under the title The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church), the church recognized its “bounden duty to take immediately some effectual method to extirpate this abomination from among us.” Strict rules were adopted at the outset mandating the emancipation of all slaves held anywhere by members of the church (albeit according to a timetable based on the age of the slave). But those rules, being “offensive to most of our southern friends,” observed nineteenth-century church historian Jesse Lee, “were but short-lived.” They “were so much opposed by many of our private members, local preachers, and some of the traveling preachers,” noted Lee, “that the execution of them was suspended


11 Charles Elliott, History of the Great Secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Year 1845: Eventuating in the Organization of the New Church, Entitled the "Methodist Episcopal Church, South" (Cincinnati: Swormstedt & Poe, 1855), 34, accessed September 14, 2014, books.google.com.
... and ... never afterward carried into full force.” Furthermore, “no part [of the rules against slavery] was retained respecting private members.”12 Although from 1796 onward, the *Discipline* continued to decry “the great evil of slavery,” proscription quickly gave way to practicality in the church’s mission to “spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.” For the church sought, not to alienate, but to reach slaveholders and, through them, the slaves they held, with the message of the Gospel. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, even Bishop Francis Asbury, patriarch of American Methodism and passionate opponent of slavery, had resigned himself to the realities of continued slaveholding among southern Methodists. “I am called upon to suffer for Christ’s sake,” he finally declared, “not for slavery.”13 Though the rule of the Methodist *Discipline* banning any member of the clergy from owning slaves remained in effect, even that restriction applied only “where the laws of the state in which he lives will admit of emancipation, and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom.”14

By the 1830s, however, growing abolitionist sentiment in the North, most notably fostered by the antislavery activism of William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society, had worked its way into the ranks of northern Methodist clergy. In 1838, the Reverend Orange Scott, a Methodist evangelist and uncompromising antislavery spokesman from Vermont, claimed antislavery majorities among the ministers of six of the sixteen northern annual conferences. Moreover, he alleged there were some

12 Ibid., 35.
14 Elliot, 42.
50,000 abolitionists within the Methodist Church at large. Five years later, Scott was among the leaders of a small but significant exodus of northern Methodists who departed the M. E. Church largely upon antislavery principles to form a new denomination known as the Wesleyan Church. Faced with the prospect of further defections, even those conservative northern clergy who opposed immediatist abolitionism were prepared to take a more assertive stand in favor of the church’s historically antislavery position.

An opportunity to test this newfound moral resolve was presented at the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held in New York City in 1844. This quadrennial gathering of delegates from each of the denomination’s annual conferences, collectively constituting the highest level of authority within the M. E. Church, witnessed two situations that would challenge northern churchmen to substantiate their antislavery principles.

The first concerned Francis A. Harding, a traveling preacher who had been suspended by the Baltimore Conference for failing to manumit the slaves he had acquired through marriage. Harding appealed his case to the General Conference on the basis of the laws of his home state of Maryland regarding the property rights of married women. The southern view of the case was well represented by Leroy M. Lee, editor of the *Richmond Christian Advocate*, one of several regional Methodist newspapers. “The appellant violated no rule of Discipline in refusing to comply with the condition of the Baltimore Conference [italics his],” wrote Lee. “The laws of Maryland,” he continued, “do not recognize, indeed they expressly deny to Harding all right of ownership in slaves

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held by his wife at the time of her marriage, and he was, therefore, not a slaveholder in the sense of the Discipline,” adding that “the Conference, in demanding the manumission of the slaves, required the performance of an act that the appellant had not only no right nor power to perform, but, which it was not possible for him to do.”16 Such arguments made little impression on northern churchmen at the Conference. After formal arguments were presented from both sides, the delegates, who as a body formed the jury, voted 117 to 56 in favor of upholding the suspension. Only two delegates from conferences located wholly within slaveholding states voted against Harding.17

The second controversy would prove the greater source of contention. James Osgood Andrew, elected bishop by the General Conference of 1832, had since come into possession of several slaves through bequest and marriage. Because the episcopate was itinerant, serving the whole church without regard to geography, many northern delegates were concerned that holding slaves would undermine the moral authority of a bishop functioning outside of slave territory. But since Andrew resided in Georgia, whose laws not only did not make manumission practicable, but vouchsafed his wife’s legal right to retain her own property following her marriage, he seemed to be in much the same position as Harding. Given his predicament, Andrew was prepared to step down to preserve the peace of the church. A large majority of the southern delegates, however, petitioned Andrew not to resign, insisting with unintended irony that “his resignation would inflict an incurable wound on the whole South and inevitably lead to division in

the Church.”  Andrew heeded their warning and stood fast only to face a call for his suspension three weeks later. On Saturday, June 1, a resolution was placed before the Conference declaring that “whereas Bishop Andrew has become connected with slavery ... it is the sense of this General Conference that he desist from the exercise of [his] office so long as this impediment remains.” It passed by nearly as wide a margin, and almost as nearly along sectional lines, as the vote upholding Harding’s suspension: 111 delegates in favor and 69 opposed.  

These two incidents convinced southern delegates that a church dominated by an increasingly antislavery North, with its more rapidly growing population relative to the South (and therefore growing representation within the General Conference), could no longer accommodate the peculiar circumstances of its southern members. Within a few days of the Andrew decision, a set of six resolutions was presented to the Conference on behalf of all those annual conferences lying entirely within slaveholding territory calling for the creation of a separate General Conference for the South. A committee being appointed to deliberate upon these resolutions, the Conference was presented three days later with a deconstructive blueprint styled the “Plan of Separation.”

The Plan consisted of twelve resolutions prescribing the allotment of territory and assets in the eventuality of the church’s division. The first resolution, concerning the territorial boundaries of such a division, was at the root of the controversy at Harrisonburg. It stipulated that certain subordinate bodies within the present M. E.

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Church would have the right to decide with which prospective church – North or South – they would affiliate. But that choice was limited “to societies, stations, and conferences bordering on the line of division, and not to interior charges, which shall in all cases be left to the care of that Church within whose territory they are situated.”

Though the committee that authored the resolution considered it free of ambiguity – one member declaring that “[e]very sentiment in the report had been sifted, and every word weighed,” and another speaking of the “minute inspection and revision of every sentence” – its failure to explicitly define the term “line of division” would prove to be a source of widespread confusion, controversy and contention.

The northern church generally equated the term with a fixed boundary corresponding to the annual conference borders as they existed in 1844. The favored view of the South held that it meant the political borders that separated the slaveholding states from the non-slaveholding states. Some southerners (including the southern party at Harrisonburg) were willing to strike a compromise with the North, whereby the line of division, initially coincident with the conference boundaries, was rendered movable. If a society on the northern side of the line chose to affiliate with the southern church, the line would shift toward the interior of the northern conference in which that society had resided; neighboring societies that were formerly “interior charges” would then become, in turn, border societies with their own right to choose their church affiliation.

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21 West, 223.
Presumably, the reverse scenario would hold for societies on the southern side of the line who elected a connection with the North.

Transcending all such ambiguity, one man at the General Conference comprehended the Plan’s border contingencies with unsurpassed clarity. He could see they would lead to disaster. Dr. Thomas E. Bond, editor of the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, the main organ of the M. E. Church, had sounded an unqualified warning to the delegates assembled to debate the Plan of Separation. “The Philadelphia Conference has all the slave territory of Delaware, Maryland, and two counties of Virginia,” he exclaimed, “and every one will be left to say how far the border extends, and all that portion of the country must be agitated with the question as to what conference they belong to! When you get to the Baltimore Conference, you have ten counties below the Blue Ridge, and all the valley of Virginia, and here again must be carried on border warfare!” His words were prescient, even prophetic, but ultimately ignored. In Harrisonburg, and elsewhere, they would be fulfilled.

In the months and years that followed, northern Methodist preachers on the new border were, in the words of one of them, “denounced as Abolitionists, and persecuted by mobs ... who labor to make a false impression upon the public mind in respect to us, thereby stirring them up to acts of violence and outrage.” In the Eastern Shore of Virginia, where the most vicious confrontations took place, it was said that “Committees of Vigilance” had been raised “to prevent the preachers from [the northern] conference from preaching in any house of worship in Accomac [sic].” In one instance, when a

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northern minister was about to preach at an Accomack County church, "a mob of about thirty or thirty-five men came to the church-yard, and ... inquired if the minister was going to preach; and being answered in the affirmative, they declared that before he should preach they would be killed."24 Elsewhere in the same county, it was rumored that a cannon was to be hauled in to drive off a northern minister. Though apparently without heavy artillery, rioters arrived on the scene and "commenced shooting around the church, throwing missiles against it, and hallooing to such a degree, that the congregation was ... alarmed."25

No cannons were fired in Harrisonburg. No physical threats were reported. But Methodists there would not escape the bitter contest over slavery that had, in the words of historian Avery O. Craven, "passed out of the realm of abstract discussion and had begun to influence the everyday affairs of men and institutions."26

Obliged to be North or South

In March of 1846, the Reverend George W. Israel, a thirty-two year old itinerant preacher from Maryland, was appointed by the Baltimore Conference to serve as the new preacher in charge of the Rockingham Circuit. One of sixteen circuits that formed the much larger Rockingham District, Israel’s new charge covered several hundred square miles. It was effectively anchored at Harrisonburg, both the seat of Rockingham County

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and site of the circuit’s “Mother Church,” whose approximately 180 members made up about one third of Israel’s new flock.  

Harrisonburg has been described as “a typical town of that period – a trading and business center and a beehive of artisans and small industries.” With a free population of just over 700, including more than eighty persons designated as “blacks” or “mulattoes,” it was smaller than nearby Staunton (the largest city in the Shenandoah Valley with a population of about 2,500), and far smaller than the transmontane cities of Richmond and Norfolk, each of which had populations exceeding 10,000 in 1850. The slave population of Harrisonburg is not known, but the number of slaves living in Rockingham County was 2,331 out of a total population of 20,294, for a slave-to-free ratio of about 1:8 – far less than the state-wide ratio of 1:2 (with some eastern counties exceeding 1:1). Disproportionately, at least five of the seven trustees of Harrisonburg’s Methodist church were slaveholders.  

The only other church in Harrisonburg was Presbyterian. The congregation there had divided in 1839, soon after the denomination split between Old School and New School factions. Though that controversy had centered primarily on theological issues,

27 In 1845, the East Rockingham Circuit was carved out of the Rockingham Circuit. Prior to that, the Rockingham Circuit included all of Rockingham County and parts of Augusta County to the south, an area in excess of 900 square miles. The estimated area of the Rockingham Circuit here is based on halving its original area. See the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society newsletter for Fall 2005, www.heritagecenter.com/Web_Pages/OnLineResearch/MoreRecords/Newsletters/HRHS%20Newsletter%20Fall%202005.pdf, accessed August 21, 2014; For reference to Harrisonburg as the site of the circuit’s “Mother Church” see Olin B. Michael, *The History of the Keezletown Methodist Church and the Rockingham Circuit, 1790-1960* (Harrisonburg, VA: s.n., 1966), 13; The proportionate size of the Harrisonburg society is extrapolated from Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the years 1846-1851*, Vol IV., (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856), Hathi Trust Digital Library, accessed November 11, 2013, catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006771726.

slavery was a factor in the partisan alignment of southern Presbyterians. Most had sided with the theologically conservative Old School faction, with whom they had the greatest doctrinal affinity, but with the added incentive that the remnant of the Presbyterian Church, now purged of its New School synods, vowed to eschew any future discussion of slavery. The majority of Presbyterians in Harrisonburg, however, sided with the New School and had succeeded in gaining control of the church. Israel hoped to forestall a similar division within Harrisonburg’s Methodist community.²⁹

Harrisonburg would be Israel’s home base for the next two years. It was there also that he would settle his wife and two small children. To that end, before departing for his new assignment, he addressed a letter to his prospective parishioners, inquiring about “the state of the parsonage, and the parsonage furniture, and other matters of a private domestic character.”³⁰ That letter was delivered into the hands of Dr. Peachey Harrison.

Harrison, who served his church as both a trustee and class leader, was a highly regarded member of Harrisonburg’s Methodist society. He enjoyed considerable standing in the surrounding community as well. Described as “[a] man of culture and of fine discriminating mind, of dignified demeanor and splendid personal appearance,” he was said to have “impressed every one at the first sight as a man of more than ordinary ability.”³¹ His attainments as “the leading physician of Rockingham county” followed


³⁰ Deposition of George W. Israel, November 24, 1848, Chancery Causes.

upon his early training under the renowned Dr. Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{32} Harrison had also achieved local prominence as a political figure, having once served as a member of the Virginia Assembly and later as a delegate to the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829-30. A former sheriff of Rockingham County, he was president and, at his death in 1848, the longest serving justice, of the County Court. A scion of the town’s founding family, Peachey Harrison wielded singular influence among those who worshiped in the modest frame church atop the hill overlooking the town’s courthouse square.\textsuperscript{33}

In his reply to Israel, Harrison expressed his regret “that things have been in a great confusion here.” He went on to explain that “those of us with Southern attachments have been driven by the reckless conduct of the preacher last year and by the utter contempt with which the late conference treated us, to take a position which I know will be as painful to you as it has been to us.” He then broke the news that a resolution had been passed at a meeting of church members the night before resolving that no monetary support would be afforded their new preacher, based on their “presumption that our preachers, including the presiding elder, are Northern men.”\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{34} Dr. Peachey Harrison to G. W. Israel, April 4, 1846, Chancery Causes.
The problems to which Harrison alluded had begun a year earlier. In March of 1845, he had called a meeting of the congregation for the purpose of eliciting its members’ views on the impending division of the M. E. Church. While there is no record of what transpired at that meeting, it is known to have been conducted in the minister’s absence. The Reverend Stephen Hildebrand was away at the annual convocation of Baltimore Conference preachers.

Though Hildebrand “had always professed to be a strong Southern man,” once having declared that all societies in the Baltimore Conference should be considered border societies with a right to “adhere to the Southern Church in succession,” recalled one member, he had since “changed and turned his coat.”35 Another member, J. Mitchell Conrad, observed that when Hildebrand returned from conference, “those members of the Society who preferred the Southern connexion thought they saw in his conduct evidence to satisfy them that he, in connexion with others was endeavoring to exert an influence over the members of the Society to induce them to adhere to the Northern Church.”36 Harrison’s daughter, Margaret Stevens, supported Conrad’s recollection. Hildebrand, she said, “took upon himself the trouble to go around the circuit as well as town ... telling the people that if they left the Baltimore Conference they would be no longer members of the Methodist Church, and representing the southern party in the most unfavorable light calling them Seceders, Schismaticks [sic], and everything else he could think of.”37 It was just such behavior, according to Conrad, that had “led those who preferred the

35 Deposition of Ferdinand G. Way, August 30, 1848, Chancery Causes.
36 Deposition of J. Mitchell Conrad, August 29, 1848, Chancery Causes.
37 Margaret Harrison Stevens and Peachey Harrison to William G. Stevens, January 1846, Box 6, Papers of the Tucker, Harrison and Smith Families, Accession #2589, 3825, 3847, 3847-a through 3847-h, and 3847-j through 3847-l, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.
Southern organization again to think of the propriety of having some Society action upon
the question [of church affiliation].”38

That action was taken the following December, when some ten or fifteen members,
al of whom favored a connection with the southern church, gathered in Dr. Harrison’s
office and came to the decision that a meeting of the whole society should be called to
put the matter of church affiliation to a vote. When Hildebrand got wind of this plan, he
is said to have threatened excommunication for anyone who attended the meeting,
claiming they would thereafter “be without preaching, or that means of grace, and their
souls would be lost.”39

Despite Hildebrand’s threats, some sixty to eighty of the white members of the
Harrisonburg society assembled in the church on January 8, 1846 to consider severing
their ties with the North. A set of aggressive resolutions was set forth outlining the
southern position. The first addressed claims being made in the North that the General
Conference had never had the authority to endorse the Plan of Separation, and that the
South, therefore, had not legitimately separated, but only seceded, from the M. E.
Church, thereby surrendering its share of the church’s assets. “This absurdity is too
naked, too palpable,” read the resolution, “to have been perpetrated by a body of
Ministers distinguished for their talents and venerable for their age, their experience in
ecclesiastical legislation and for their known piety, and equally discreditable to the
Southern delegates, because it implied a want of sagacity to penetrate the thin veil with
which this shallow pretence [sic] of honesty and fairness was covered.” The second

38 Deposition of J. Mitchell Conrad.
39 Deposition of Isaac Hardesty, August 30, 1848, Chancery Causes.
resolution determined that “the continual and strenuous efforts by the Northern and Western [Methodist] Press ... to generate feuds and sow discord in the South, after the separation had taken place, have done incalculable mischief, by producing alienation of affection between the Northern and Southern sections of the Church.” Thirdly, it was resolved that “it would greatly contribute to promote the peace of the Church, North and South, and especially of the Baltimore Conference, if the entire slaveholding territory were separated from the non slaveholding territory and attached to the Church South.” It was further resolved that “as we live in a slaveholding State and in the midst of slavery, which is on the increase, rather than diminishing, and will so far as we can see, continue to exist indefinitely, it would better suit us, and we would prefer having our membership in the Church South.” Finally, it was proposed that since “as the Baltimore Conference is at present constituted, we would be liable frequently to have Preachers sent us with anti-slavery prejudices and Northern attachments,” the Conference should be advised to see that “men with these prejudices and attachments be not sent to this District and this Circuit next year.”

These resolutions were met with unanimous approval. That outcome was greatly abetted by the fact that none of the members who favored a continued connection with the northern church showed up for the meeting, with the exception of two who refrained from voting. A letter addressed by the north to the leaders of the southern party some time later attributed the north’s absence to a concern “that any agitation of the subject [of church relations] would not be productive of good, and might give rise to further

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40 Richmond Christian Advocate, March 5, 1846, Chancery Causes.
misunderstanding and cause alienation of affection."41 A cynical Margaret Stevens, however, was convinced that “Mr. Hildebrand persuaded them not to go” because “he did not want the members to become enlightened on both sides of the question.”42 It is reasonable to assume that the north’s absence also had something to do with the fact that they were in the minority.

Despite the north’s refusal to attend the meeting, the south professed a continued “hope that we may yet prevail upon our brethren who differ with us to pursue such a course as will tend rather to a reconciliation of differences than exasperation and a widening of the breach which has already unhappily been made between us.” They offered to compromise on the resolution concerning the separation of slaveholding territory from the Baltimore Conference. “We will consent,” they said, “to remain under the control of the Northern General Conference, on condition that that portion of Virginia which is now attached to the Baltimore Conference be erected into a new conference and embracing nothing but Virginia territory.”43 However unlikely it was that the Conference would ever accede to such a division was a moot point. The north refused to reconcile with the south on any terms but their own.

Any aversion northern members may have had to agitation was certainly not evident in the memorial they drew up representing their own position soon after the southern resolutions were made known. “I have not seen it,” said Stevens sometime later, “but they carried this paper around town getting signatures, and they told every man, woman

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41 John S. Effinger to Dr. Peachey Harrison and others, 12 May 1846, Chancery Causes; For the sake of simplicity, I have adopted the use of the uncapitalized terms “north” and “south” to refer to the two parties at Harrisonburg. When capitalized, these terms are used conventionally to refer to geographical regions.
42 Margaret Harrison Stevens and Peachey Harrison to William G. Stevens.
43 *Richmond Christian Advocate*, March 5, 1846.
and child you must sign this paper if you want to remain in the Methodist church.” Stevens blamed the entire controversy on Hildebrand. He had “been acting very unbecomingly both as a minister and a christian,” she said, maintaining that without him “there would not have been anything done at present.” Writing to Margaret’s husband, William G. Stevens, Harrison described some of Hildebrand’s purportedly unchristian behavior toward members of the southern party. Hildebrand was said to have assaulted trustee Jacob Rohr (though probably only verbally); he had had “a great falling out” with Harvey Wartmann, publisher of the Rockingham Register; and he had gotten into “a violent quarrel” with Jacob Stevens, William’s brother, that very nearly came to fisticuffs. Hildebrand, proclaimed Harrison, was “a disgraced, degraded man in this community with the exception of his northern friends,” adding that “Mr. Hildebrand’s present course has driven us of the South to take measures of defense.” Underscoring such militant language was Margaret Stevens’ observation that “wherever you go the first inquiry is are you north or south,” adding that “the time has come that you are obliged to be one or the other.”

Largely missing from the historical record of this factionalization is the response of the African American members of the church, though they accounted for nearly 20% of the congregation. When the time came for members to formally declare their allegiances, the status accorded black members by the majority southern party is well summed up in the words of one of that party’s leaders, Dr. Jonathan Clary. “We have not, nor did we

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44 Margaret Harrison Stevens and Peachey Harrison to William G. Stevens.
think it proper to count in our votes even ... one colored member,” he said, “nor did we at any time deem it proper to interest the colored members in the question.”

Only two references to black members of the congregation with regard to the north-south controversy have come to light. One is recorded in the deposition of G. W. Israel concerning his polling of the “colored” class as he was compiling church membership figures for his annual report to the Baltimore Conference. He had visited the class during its meeting on March 7, 1847 to consult with John Rohr, a trustee in the southern camp who served as the class leader. “While I was putting on my coat and hat to leave the house,” recalled Israel, “Mr. Rohr, got up and remarked that he had a few words to say to the class. He stated that the majority of the white society had adhered to the church, South, that he was a class leader in that church, and that all who wished him to be their leader still, would signify it by rising up. No one I believe arose.”

The other account comes from the memoirs of Israel’s immediate successor on the circuit, Wilson Lee Spottswood, who arrived in Harrisonburg shortly after the legal battle over church property had begun. He recalled a meeting of the black members of the church:

When the seceders went off from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and established the M. E. Church, South, the time came for the negroes to decide by their votes what Church relationship they would choose; and a crowd of them filled the old meeting-house in Harrisonburg. A venerable negro preacher, with scant white wool, trembling limbs, dim eyes, and the cracked voice of age, arose, and addressed the meeting thus: ‘Bredren an' sistren, I doan know nothin' 'bout dis yere big fuss dat's bin agoin' on in de church, yit I knows dat de ol' church astan'in' on dis yere hill am de mudder ob us all; we is 'er born' chil'en; she done fotch us up; she seeded us, an' done eb'ry t'ing a kin' mudder could adone fer 'er chil'n; an' 'twould'n be right no ways fer eny chile ob hern to run away fum 'er; an' it ar' my 'pinion dat all ob us orter

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45 Deposition of Jonathan Clary, undated, Chancery Causes.
46 Deposition of George W. Israel.
stay jis whar we is.’ The vote was taken, and all the colored brethren and sisters voted to remain in our church, except two or three.47

Unfortunately, this phonetically creative account seems to be the only one that actually gives a voice to African Americans throughout the Harrisonburg controversy.

A Thorough-going Body of Anti-Slavery Men

Recalling Harrison’s letter to Israel, “the reckless conduct of the preacher last year” was followed by “the utter contempt with which the late conference treated us.” That conference was the annual gathering of itinerant preachers from across the Baltimore Conference that convened in Baltimore in March of 1846. It was the first such assembly since the formation of the M. E. Church, South the previous year.

Harrison’s grievance likely referred to the assembled Conference’s response to the “memorials and petitions” it received “from several circuits ... and from meetings, official and otherwise, in other circuits” entreating the Baltimore Conference to “withdraw itself from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and attach itself to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” or to “divide itself into two conferences, erecting a new conference, to include all that portion of the state of Virginia which lies within the present bounds of the conference.” The Conference roundly rejected these proposals, which almost certainly included appeals from Harrisonburg. In its reply, framed within a published “pastoral address,” the Conference stated that it could not affiliate with the southern church because such a move would “not comply consistently with its sense of duty to God, and his Church.” And to divide itself “would be revolutionary, and wholly inconsistent with

its duties and ecclesiastical obligations,” as well as “a violent disruption, neither sanctified by the Discipline of the Church, nor by the ‘plan of separation’.” Leaving no room for further deliberation, the collective body of preachers officially (and unanimously) declared their intention to “continue to regard themselves a constituent part of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” It was no matter that the Conference also denied “having any fellowship with abolitionism,” and resolved “not to hold connection with any ecclesiastical body that shall make non-slaveholding a condition of membership in the Church.” In summarily rejecting those ideas that Harrison and his co-partisans actively supported, it would seem that the Conference had shown its “utter contempt” for those in Harrisonburg with southern sympathies.48

Two months after the Baltimore Conference pronounced its allegiance to the northern church, members of the southern party in Harrisonburg addressed a letter to their northern counterparts, declaring that the Conference would now “be bound by solemn pledge and inviolate faith, to the Northern Church, only to be released by the occurrence of a single event, viz: that non-Slaveholding is made a test of condition of membership.” But they believed the M. E. Church would never need trouble itself to impose such a condition upon the Conference. For the Baltimore Conference, they suggested, would freely adopt that condition of its own accord. Abolitionists, they imagined, could be heard even then boasting that “the Bal[timore] Conf[erence] ... will do the work themselves, so soon as they can, which we wish to see done.” This was the very

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48 Elliott, 1086-1087; Baltimore Conference Resolutions, Chancery Causes.
language, decried the southern party, “of Zion’s Herald, the mouth-piece of Northern abolitionism.”

Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal, a Methodist paper out of New England, had indeed encouraged the idea that the Baltimore Conference was teeming with abolitionists. The March 26, 1845 edition included a “Letter from Baltimore,” reporting on that year’s annual conclave of the Baltimore Conference. It was this conference that Stephen Hildebrand was attending when the Harrisonburg society had its first meeting to consider the topic of church division. In this letter, the writer assured his audience that the Conference “has manifested its utter abhorrence of the great evil of slavery ... and privately I have found its members striving to do every thing in their power to rid the church of its slaves.” In a further report published on April 2, the same correspondent wrote that the entire gathering of preachers at the Conference was “thoroughly imbued with anti-slavery sentiments.” He was glad to report that he had “never associated with a more thorough-going body of anti-slavery men than the Baltimore Conference.”

Around the same time, the Christian Advocate and Journal, the most widely circulated northern Methodist newspaper, published an article assuring Methodists in the slaveholding portions of the Baltimore Conference that “[t]here is not, it is believed, an abolitionist in the conference; nor is there a member of that body who would consent that slaveholding should be a test of membership in the Church.” Though the Conference was anti-slavery in principle (as the M. E. Church had always been), and would not tolerate slaveholding among its clergymen, should abolitionists gain control of the northern

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49 Peachey Harrison and Jacob Rohr, Sr. to John S. Effinger and others, May 14, 1846, Chancery Causes.
church and make slaveholding among its members grounds for expulsion, "the Baltimore Annual Conference would not submit to it ... would not desert their people, nor suffer their rights to be destroyed."  

By the time the Conference assigned Israel to the Rockingham Circuit a year later, such assurances carried no weight whatsoever with the southern faction at Harrisonburg. Moreover, they expected any preacher sent to them by the Conference to be a doctrinaire "Northern man." Nevertheless, Harrison adopted a diplomatic tone in closing his letter to Israel. He assured the preacher that no personal attack on his character was intended. "We do not allow ourselves," said Harrison, "to entertain the opinion that men who differ from us on this question [of church relations] may not be honest and good Christian men." Indeed, Israel would be welcomed in Harrisonburg where "we will be pleased to hear anything you may have to say on this exciting subject," adding that "we shall be exceedingly glad if you can convince us that your views are so accordant with ours as that we can consistently with our sense of duty and the position we have taken before the community, yield you our cordial support."  

Israel, in turn, hoped to come as a peacemaker. He was "actuated by a sincere desire to promote the interest of the church and restore harmony among brethren." Had he been aware of a second letter sent out by the southern party at that same time, Israel might have come with more sober expectations.

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50 "To the Members of the M. E. Church in the Slaveholding Territory of the Baltimore Annual Conference," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, 21 May 1845, American Periodicals Series.
51 Dr. Peachey Harrison to G. W. Israel, 4 April 1846, Chancery Causes.
52 G. W. Israel to Peachey Harrison, April 20, 1846, Chancery Causes.
Contending for Adverse Principles

"The duty has devolved upon me," began J. Mitchell Conrad, writing to the lay leaders of the East Rockingham Circuit on behalf of Harrisonburg's southern faction, "to inform you of the course which we have pursued and the position which we now occupy – our only hope has heretofore hung upon you as you only can open the door of admission for us into the Church South ... Will you aid us? Will you help us to stand?"53

Even as Harrison extended a qualified welcome to Israel, he and his confederates were actively plotting to attach the society in Harrisonburg to the M. E. Church, South. But they faced one formidable obstacle. According to that construction of the Plan of Separation which equated the line of division with the conference borders that divided the two churches, Harrisonburg, which lay some twenty miles west of the Virginia Conference border, with the East Rockingham Circuit intervening, was an "interior" society with no right to choose its own church affiliation. To be sure, members of the southern party believed they technically had every right to affiliate with the southern church simply by virtue of residing in a border conference. It seemed to them only common sense that "[t]he South would in the nature of things spread her church over the entire slave States if practicable, and consistent with good faith ... and in conformity with, and in the very words of the Deed [i.e., Plan] of Separation adopt such measures as would fix the very line of division that would be established by assuming the northern boundary of the slave States as being the line of division" and on the basis of that political boundary "ascertain the border societies, stations, and conferences, that by vote of a

majority, were to fix finally the permanent line of division between the two churches.\textsuperscript{54} According to this logic, Harrisonburg was a border society because it lay within a conference that adjoined (and partly straddled) the Mason-Dixon line. But the southern party had, as one member explained, acceded to “Mr. Hildebrand’s construction of the plan of separation ... wishing to separate peaceably from the Baltimore Conference.”\textsuperscript{55} Citing similarly peaceable motives, another member noted “a desire to accommodate their action with the views entertained by some [read the northern church] relative to border societies.”\textsuperscript{56} One might suppose that they had also adopted the most legally defensible construction of the Plan.

In appealing to the East Rockingham Circuit, the southern party in Harrisonburg hoped to close the gap between them and the border of the M. E. Church, South. If the societies of that circuit that lay between Harrisonburg and the Blue Ridge adhered to the South in a westward progression, the border would come to Harrisonburg and the door would be open for the society there to declare for the southern church. Such a scenario was dependent, of course, upon a shared sense of purpose.

“As we view the subject there are now two parties whose positions are clearly defined and who are contending for adverse principles,” wrote Conrad to his Methodist neighbors to the east. While Harrisonburg remained under the jurisdiction of the northern church, its members were in the intolerable position of having to give their “influence and money to Abolitionism and its allies and endorse the principle for which they are

\textsuperscript{54} “A true construction of the Plan of Separation,” Undated document submitted on behalf of defendants at the request of Dr. Jonathan Clary; written before the suit was instituted per court’s annotation, Chancery Causes.
\textsuperscript{55} Deposition of Ferdinand G. Way, August 30, 1848, Chancery Causes.
\textsuperscript{56} Deposition of Jonathan Clary.
contending in this controversy.” They would be forced to “reprobate that [principle] contended for by the South and throw the weight of our influence and money against those who are endeavoring to stem the torrent of Northern Abolitionism and its alliances and to maintain southern institutions and rights.” Conrad reminded his audience that “we are Virginians, Southerners at heart, in feeling, and in fact,” adding that “we believe the time has arrived when it is imperatively our duty to speak out and to speak clearly, strongly and unequivocally in favor of the South.”

In identifying himself, fellow members of his faction, and his presumptive allies in the neighboring circuit as true southerners, Conrad insinuated that those members of the Harrisonburg society who favored a continued connection with the northern church had somehow renounced their own regional attachments. Given Conrad’s unmistakably proslavery tone, were his letter considered apart from other evidence, it might appear that the southern partisans were indeed the “proslavery Methodists” in the dispute. However, not only does the historical record expressly contradict such a distinction, it imparts a certain ambiguity to the very label “proslavery” as it may have applied to either party in the Harrisonburg case.

**The Sentiment of All True Americans**

Evidence suggests that a variety (or at least a vestige) of antislavery sentiment, if largely in the abstract, existed among members of Harrisonburg’s *southern* party. Most of that evidence centers on Peachey Harrison, whose personal history is better documented than that of anyone else who was a member of the church at the time of the

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57 J. Mitchell Conrad to S. B. Jennings, et. al., April 4, 1846, Chancery Causes.
schism. Given that he “was looked up to as the leading layman in the church” and was clearly the acknowledged leader of the southern faction (described by Israel’s successor on the Rockingham Circuit as its “chief member”), it seems safe to assume that his position on slavery, though today a matter of some conjecture, found sympathy among other members of his party.58

As a steward and class leader, Harrison was for many years among the group of typically ten to fifteen members of the circuit who met, as a rule, four times a year under the superintendence of the presiding elder of the Rockingham District and the circuit’s traveling preachers (the preacher in charge and his assistant). Unlike the annual conferences, where representation was limited to itinerant preachers, this church-wide institution, known in Methodist parlance as a “quarterly conference,” provided an opportunity for laymen to participate in the affairs of the church beyond their own congregations.

One order of business recorded in the minutes of the Rockingham Circuit Quarterly Conference between the years 1815 and 1817 was the execution of bills of emancipation by members of the circuit who had purchased slaves.59 When, in 1808, the General Conference decided to leave it to the discretion of the annual conferences to set policy concerning the buying and selling of slaves, the Baltimore Conference adopted the rule that the General Conference enacted in 1796 but had since repealed. According to that

58 “Rockingham County,” Rockingham Register, July 9, 1885; Spottswood, 69-71.
59 Minutes of Quarterly Conferences for Rockingham Circuit Begun at a Camp Meeting Held at the Millpond, near Col. B. Harrison’s Friday August 25th to 29th Inclusive 1815, Shenandoah Local History Collection, SC5055, Series VII, Special Collections Department, Carrier Library, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA. I have placed in italics those words or phrases that were underlined in the original. Unfortunately, only the minutes of the quarterly conference for the years 1815 to 1823 were available to me.
rule, laymen of each quarterly conference were to decide on a limited term of service for any slave purchased by a member of their circuit. Upon completion of that term, the slave would be set free. Harrison was directly involved in these proceedings.

At the quarterly conference held in August of 1815, for example, a report was made by a committee of three, including Harrison, appointed to consider “the Proposition of J. Cravens,” a member of the Harrisonburg church, “on the Subject of a Negro girl and boy slaves, the object of which Proposition was to secure the emancipation of them both.” The committee had arrived at terms by which these children would work off their indemnity and then be freed.60

The following year, a committee was appointed that included George Sites, one of Harrison’s fellow trustees and a co-defendant in the future lawsuit. That committee was to determine the length of service required of two slaves, a mother and daughter, purchased by Rueben Harrison, a member of the Harrisonburg society and a cousin of Peachey’s. In that instance, it was decided that the mother would be manumitted in eighteen years and the child in twenty-two years, at the age of twenty-seven. Moreover, it was ordered that Rueben Harrison “shall learn or cause [the child] to be learned to read reasonably well in the Bible.”61

Around that same time, a memorial was drawn up by the quarterly conference addressed to “the General Conference in Baltimore convened.” Though undated, the placement of a copy within the bound meeting minutes indicates it was addressed to the

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60 Ibid, 2-3.
61 Ibid, 9.
General Conference of either 1816 or 1820. This document constitutes a thorough indictment of slavery.

“In an evil day,” began the memorialists, “men came forward to our societies, who were in the practice of slavery.” In accordance with the so-called “General Rule” of the *Discipline*, they professed “a desire to flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from their sins.” That same rule required “that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, first by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially the buying and selling men, women and children, with an intention to enslave them.”

The Rockingham Circuit interpreted the General Rule to mean that a slaveholder coming into the church was bound to make arrangements for the emancipation of his slaves – something that certain men had failed to do. “It appears to us that an intentional slaveholder lives in the habitual violation of our General rules,” explained the memorialists, “because if a man buy or sell a soul, with an intention to emancipate it, he does not violate this rule, provided he fulfil his intention: But if he either buy or sell with an intention to enslave for life, he becomes a transgressor: consequently it is neither buying nor selling alone that constitutes the crime, but the intention to enslave for life.”

In their objection to slavery as a life-long condition, they declared “that they only feel the sentiment of all true Americans, in as much as the nation has declared to the world, in the Declaration of Independence, ‘that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ and in our general Constitution, the voice of our nation is, that ‘no person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property, without due process of law.’”
The memorialists prayed “that the General Conference would adopt some plan that would enable us to look forward to the day when this great evil shall be removed and the Methodist Church shall become the glory of all the churches.” They proposed their own plan (which was never adopted) requiring “that all persons coming forward to join our societies, holding slaves, shall be informed, that we will take them on trial for twelve months and afford them every information in our powers, on the subject – and if they will submit to the same plan of emancipation as in the case of official members, we will consider them acceptable members of our church; but if not, they can have no place among us.”

Unfortunately, no individual names are connected with this memorial. Though Harrison attended most meetings of the quarterly conference around the time it was written, it remains uncertain whether or not he personally endorsed it. Still, its very existence points to Harrison’s willingness to advance the practice of emancipation within the Methodist church.

At the time the memorial was written, Harrison would have been a class leader at Harrisonburg and, if written in 1816, a steward of the circuit. In either capacity, he was officially a member of the quarterly conference whether he was present at the meetings or not. In the minutes for each meeting, the list of members in attendance was routinely followed by a statement to the effect that the characters of all those present had been examined and stood approved. In some cases, the absent members were anonymously noted as having been approved as well, though the lack of such a statement seems to signify nothing more than a lack of procedural consistency. In no case was the character

of any member of the quarterly conference called into question. If Harrison had not at least tacitly supported the conference rule requiring manumission – the flouting of which was so roundly condemned in the memorial – then it would seem unlikely Harrison’s character would have been consistently approved, or that he would have been continued as an officer of the church.

The evidence points to Harrison himself complying with the rule of the Baltimore Conference (which was abrogated in 1820) compelling all members to make legal arrangements for their slaves’ eventual manumission. In 1810, census records indicate he had three slaves and no “free colored” in his household. By 1820, the situation had been reversed: he had three “free colored” and no slaves.63 This turnaround is consistent with John Wayland’s observations in his history of Rockingham County. “In 1790 all the negroes in the county were reported as slaves: there were apparently no free negroes,” notes Wayland, “but in 1810 there were 200 or more free negroes.” Wayland believes this “was probably the result, in large measure at least, of the work done within this period by the Methodists and other religious bodies in behalf of emancipation.”64

Though Harrison would go on to own other slaves, the record suggests he was not categorically opposed to emancipation in principle or in practice. Of course, emancipation was one thing and the integration of free blacks into society was quite another. It is perhaps telling that around the same time that the Rockingham Circuit was enforcing the emancipation requirements of the Conference, Harrison became involved with the American Colonization Society (ACS).

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63 U.S. Census records for Rockingham County: 1810 and 1820, accessed May 3, 2014, familysearch.org; the emancipation of Harrison’s slaves is supported by MacMaster, p. 34.
64 Wayland, A History of Rockingham County, 107.
The ACS was organized in 1817 "to promote and execute a plan for colonizing (with their consent) the free people of colour, residing in our country, in Africa, or such other place as Congress shall deem most expedient."\(^6\) The motivating principle behind the Society's mission was the belief that freed blacks could never be fully integrated into American society. Only in Africa (or some other place segregated from white society) could blacks ever hope to thrive as an independent people with the kind of social, economic and political rights enjoyed by white Americans. At the same time, it was thought, freed blacks from America could help lift Africa out of the darkness of pagan barbarism into the light of Christian civilization.

Within its first decade, the ACS had earned the endorsement of Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians. In time, the majority of southern evangelicals supported the idea of colonization.\(^6\) Donald Mathews has suggested that the Methodists' "early antislavery impulse was diverted into that movement."\(^6\)

Harrison became involved with the colonization movement nearly from its beginning. In 1819, he helped form an auxiliary society in Harrisonburg, serving as corresponding secretary and later as a vice-president.\(^6\) By 1820, this local chapter had more than 100 subscribers.\(^6\) While many southerners gave colonization their passive approval, or perhaps even contributed their one dollar a year to become a member of the

\(^{67}\) Mathews, vii.
\(^{68}\) *The Weekly Recorder*, October 6, 1819, 62, American Periodicals Series.
ACS, there is little doubt that Harrison’s enthusiasm for the movement exceeded that of most. But just what was it he supported?

Some abolitionists charged that the ACS was nothing more than “a racist scheme designed to remove free African Americans from the land of their birth” and thereby “strengthen slavery by getting rid of its most determined opponents.”70 William Lloyd Garrison, the clarion voice of immediatist abolitionism, denounced the Colonization Society for leading “uncautious minds astray in a labyrinth of sophistry.”71 Because the efforts of the ACS “coincided with movements in the states of the upper South to expel free African Americans,” notes historian Stanley Harrold, “there was considerable fear within the black community that the organization’s real aim was to strengthen slavery through the forceful removal of all free black people from America.”72

Harrison’s advocacy for the colonization movement cannot easily be reduced to self-serving or hypocritical motives. Relatively few people west of the Blue Ridge had a vested interest in strengthening the institution of slavery. Moreover, if his obituary is to be believed, Harrison “favored every movement that pointed to the liberation of man from a state of physical and mental servitude.”73 But whatever his true feelings about the future of slavery, his support of colonization helps clarify his opposition to abolitionism, along with that of his fellow church members (north and south). He no doubt considered

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73 Wartmann.
the settling of former slaves en masse among a politically, socially, and economically dominant white populace far from ideal for members of either race.

The Rapacious Juggernaut of Northern Fanaticism

It was a common notion among southern evangelicals that northern abolitionists were willfully oblivious to the true implications of a general emancipation. Abolitionists were criticized, says Anne Loveland, "for dealing with slavery as an 'abstract question' instead of a practical one," or as if it were a question of "whether slavery should be introduced, for the first time, into the community or not." A sensible view of slavery, to southern minds, had to account for "its actual state, in all its bearings, ramifications, and connections." Only mad recklessness, it seemed, could account for the policy of immediate abolition espoused by ultra-abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and those who supported the goals of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Were these abolitionists to have their way, it was thought, slaves would be turned out into society and forced to make their way through stealing and the invasion of private property. The common perception, notes Edward Crowther, was that "a lawless South would emerge, a land no longer fit for white habitation." Abolitionism, it was believed, "threatened the whole fabric of southern society."75

That perception was clearly present in and around Harrisonburg. In a letter published in the Richmond Christian Advocate on November 4, 1847, a member of the East Rockingham Circuit identifying himself simply as "South," accused preachers from

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74 Loveland, 198.
75 Crowther in McKivigan and Snay, 334.
the northern church of spreading subversive ideas among the region’s slave population. Soon after the controversy over Bishop Andrew erupted at the General Conference of 1844, claimed the writer, “we found to our astonishment, that our slave population were as well or better informed on the subject than many of the whites” and that “a spirit of insolence and insubordination has been more or less manifested by them to the present time.” He believed northern preachers were encouraging slaves to bide their time until abolitionists could achieve their objectives. He imagined insidious words of encouragement spoken to slaves behind their masters’ backs:

Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh for the present, endeavor to make your situations as tolerable as possible. We sympathize with you, and intend to aid you all we can – we are the advocates of universal emancipation. Great exertions are now making in the North, both in Church and State to liberate you. The Baltimore Conference is also with the North, and in consequence of its having slaveholding territory within its bounds, we can have access to the slave and slaveholder, and thereby render you more efficient service than avowed abolitionists, who for the present dare not approach you.

South assured his readers that “this is no fancy sketch,” but was rather “the interpretation given by the slave population of a large portion of Western Virginia, to the position which the Baltimore Conference at present occupy.” He warned his fellow Virginians “to be upon the alert,” assuring them that the very “constituent elements of Southampton [i.e., Nat Turner’s Rebellion] are superabundant in our country,” adding that “our very hearthstones may be desolated, our chambers violated, and our sacred altars desecrated by this fell spirit of abolitionism.”

Similar, if somewhat more restrained, concerns were expressed by Harrison’s son Gessner, a noted professor of ancient languages at the University of Virginia. In a letter to his father in May of 1847, Gessner wrote of the “monstrous” notion of “compelling
societies in slaveholding states to be subjected to the control of a General Conference that comprises a vast majority of semi-abolitionists, making it possible for a Conference to station among them men who would think they did God’s service in inciting [slaves] to insurrection and murder, to say nothing of insubordination and abduction.” By the late 1840s, notes Stanley Harrold, “most white southerners were convinced that an abolitionist North aimed to destroy slavery and provoke race war.”

Such fears were stoked by an exaggerated notion of abolitionism’s preponderance in the North. As Crowther has observed, “southern evangelicals gradually lost the capacity to distinguish between the terms abolitionist and northerner and, erroneously according to the historical record, made these words synonyms.” The notion of a North overrun by abolitionists was endorsed even by an antislavery moderate like John McClintock, editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*. McClintock, who “never could believe ... that all slaveholders are sinners, and should be cut off from the fellowship of Christianity,” described what he perceived to be abolitionism’s virtual monopoly on northern sentiment, as

the division of Northern men into abolitionists and anti-abolitionists exists no longer. We have Garrisonians, Liberty men, Methodist Extirpators, and Whig and Democratic Anti-slaverymen; and these, I think, imbody [sic] the great mass of the Northern people. The rest, at any rate, are hardly worth speaking of. The whole people, bating the insignificant fraction just alluded to, are imbued with anti-slavery feeling; not the dormant, passive feeling which existed ... but a living, even an aggressive, power, which not only refuses to strengthen the institution of slavery, but speaks ominously of its overthrow ... Men who, ten years ago, walked softly, as on eggs, when they dared to approach the subject at all, and spoke gingerly about the

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76 Gessner Harrison to Peachey Harrison, 20 May 1847, Box 6, Papers of the Tucker, Harrison and Smith Families.
78 Crowther in McKivigan and Snay, 318.
“domestic institutions” of the South, have now learned to call things by their right names, and speak out, with refreshing boldness, of the “curse of slavery.”

Under such a threat of northern aggression, it is not surprising that both parties in Harrisonburg were prepared to stand up against what one southerner, speaking at the General Conference of 1844, so colorfully described as “the rapacious Juggernaut of northern fanaticism.”

Oneness of Feeling

Shortly after his arrival in Harrisonburg, G. W. Israel, accompanied by his assistant, the Reverend William H. Wilson, met with members of the southern party in Dr. Harrison’s office to address the crisis facing the congregation. After “a free and friendly interchange of sentiment,” it was concluded that if the two preachers would use their influence to “induce other brethren who differed with them to present them a compromise,” the south “would respectfully receive and entertain it.” It was agreed that Israel would arrange a meeting of the north where he would present the south’s proposal.

Though Israel’s ensuing meeting with northern members produced no constructive results, its eventual outcome does reveal the common ground occupied by both parties. A letter of compromise on behalf of the north was drafted by Israel and adopted at a subsequent meeting with some modifications. The final letter, signed by the slaveholder Effinger acting as secretary, contained the following two resolutions:

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80 Elliott, 363.
81 Deposition of George W. Israel.
1st That we approve of the resolution of the Baltimore Conference at its late session, in which our ministers express there adherence to the Methodist E. Church, disclaim all fellowship with abolitionism and pledge themselves to protect the rights and privileges [sic] of slaveholders, as guaranteed to them in the Discipline.

2nd That we are opposed to all agitation upon the Subject of Slavery in the general Conference and earnestly desire that our Conference should use all proper means to prevent it lest a state of things should occur rendering it necessary for us to change our church relations. 82

Clearly, the north’s commitment to the M. E. Church was far from unconditional. Should the Baltimore Conference fail to stand up for the rights of slaveholders or fail to stave off further controversy over slavery in the General Conference, the northern members would find it necessary to cross over to the southern church themselves. Why then were they so obstinately determined to remain in the M. E. Church even as most of their fellow parishioners sought a welcome place in the Church South free from ecclesiastical controversy over slaveholding and abolitionism? Why should they choose a position that one southern trustee, Jacob Rohr, Sr., so desperately sought to escape because “he could not suffer the anxiety of mind which he had endured for some years or more past”? 83

Perhaps the northern members lacked the same sense of urgency in the face of the abolitionist threat. Among the sixteen men who can be positively identified as members of the southern party, more than a dozen were slaveholders, collectively in possession of more than sixty slaves. By contrast, of the ten northern men who can be identified, only two were definite slaveholders in 1850 with only eight slaves between them. 84 But if the northern party had less invested in the institution of slavery, they were not necessarily less inclined to fear abolitionism as a threat to their society.

82 John S. Effinger (as secretary) to P. Harrison and others, 12 May 1846, Chancery Causes.
83 Deposition of George W. Israel.
84 Slaveholding data is taken from the 1850 U. S. Census Slave Schedule for Rockingham County, accessed May 9, 2014, familysearch.org.
A closer look at the letter of compromise drafted by Israel and approved by the northern party suggests more salient reasons for the north’s continued allegiance to the Baltimore Conference. “We doubt not,” it begins, “that you in common with us, deeply deplore the state of things that has arisen in our beloved Church in this place, and elsewhere, ... and trust we all sincerely and ardently desire to see that oneness of feeling and concert of action which have so long existed among us.” Appealing to a common sense of Christian duty, the writer hoped to yet “unite our efforts for the salvation of our fellow man and the spreading of scriptural holiness over the lands.” These remarks might easily be dismissed as mere rhetorical flourishes but for their similarity in posture and tone to a much fuller reflection upon the state of Methodism published as a petition in the *Christian Advocate and Journal* of November 4, 1844.

Entitled “Protest Against the Division of the M. E. Church,” that petition was essentially a position paper, representing the views of virtually every traveling preacher assigned to the Rockingham District at the time. Among its signatories were G. W. Israel, William H. Wilson, and Israel’s predecessor on the Rockingham Circuit, Stephen Hildebrand. The extent to which its sentiments resonate with the compromise letter takes on added significance in light of Hildebrand’s purported influence with his northern parishioners. Indeed, there can be little doubt that Harrisonburg’s northern members were sympathetic to the views espoused by this treatise explicitly endorsed by their preachers.

Much like the letter of compromise, the petition eulogized the “union for which we have always been distinguished” and expressed “the strongest and most ardent desire for

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85 John S. Effinger to Dr. Peachey Harrison and others, May 12, 1846, Chancery Causes.
its perpetuation" which alone would make possible a "going forth with accelerated
velocity in the great work of spreading 'Scriptural holiness'." More notable, though,
were its dark forebodings concerning the debate over slavery within the church:

The whole nation is particularly sensitive upon the question that has given rise to our
difficulties. Our vast country has felt for years past the earthquake of this
commotion. It is now like a mighty volcano, heaving and threatening, and whose
fires but wait an opportunity to pour forth their scorching flames through the lengths
and breadths of the land; or, to change our illustration, it is a magazine that needs
nothing but the torch to produce an explosion ... If now the Christian denominations,
that should always proclaim peace, good will, and unity among brethren, be so
unfortunate as to divide upon a subject so peculiarly delicate; and the elements of
this division thrown throughout society, pushing forward the chafed and irritated
feelings of the political confederation, what can we expect but the most dreadful
internal strife and disorder in the midst of our hitherto glorious republic?

Such a sense of impending doom was hardly unique to Methodists of the
Rockingham District. Religious and secular leaders across the country shared similar
fears about the possible social and political ramifications of religious schism. These fears
were widely disseminated, and no doubt intensified, by the press. "There were some
twelve hundred newspapers in the United States in the 1840s," notes historian C. C.
Goen, "and they covered the disruption of the churches closely, quoting copiously from
each other to pass the disquieting news along."86 As the New York Observer remarked:
"The progress of separation in different denominations of Christians, occasioned by the
vexed question of slavery, is exciting universal attention, and awakening various
emotions in the public mind. The religious newspapers and secular journals of a
respectable character, alike influenced by a spirit of true patriotism, are expressing their
serious apprehension of the influence of these divisions upon the integrity of the

86 C. C. Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the
American Civil War (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 100.
Union.”87 The *Charleston Mercury*, for one, pronounced the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church to be “the most ominous event of the times ... the first dissolution of the Union.”88 The religious press carried this theme forward, perhaps nowhere to greater effect than the Presbyterian *Watchman of the South* in 1845:

The churches once divided, North and South, Demagogues will have but little [more] to do to dissolve the Union of the States. That done, then we shall see war and horrible contests. Brother will slay brother. The father and the son will stand in opposing battle lines, and tyrants, and demons will clap their hands at the blighting of the last hopes of Man, for a fair fabric of well established liberty, for a scale of imposing magnitude.89

“The whole nation,” observes Goen, “was watching with more uneasiness than has been commonly recognized.”90

The rhetoric inspired by that uneasiness suggests a profound correlation between the antebellum religious schisms and the sectional strife that led to civil war. But the question of cause and effect connecting the two has long been a subject of debate. Goen is sympathetic toward the perspective likely shared by the northern Methodists at Harrisonburg. He has argued that “the division of America’s popular churches into sectional factions several years before the political break ... painfully exposed the deep moral chasm between North and South, furthering the alienation between sections and contributing to the eventual disruption of the Union.”91 Donald G. Mathews, on the other hand, has suggested a more subtle connection. In Mathews’ view, “churches lacked the institutional power and independence of popular morality to have acted as bonds of union,” arguing that the Methodist schism “neither portended [the Civil War] nor

87 Ibid., 101.
88 Ibid., 100.
89 Ibid., 99.
90 Ibid., 100.
91 Goen, 4.
‘snapped’ a bond of union: it merely became one of many events which contributed to increased sectional antagonism.”\(^9^2\)

Whichever view is most correct does not, of course, change what people believed to be true at the time. It seems likely that the northern members at Harrisonburg refused to endorse, even as a fait accompli, an act of divisiveness they thought threatened the political union of the country. Perhaps they held out hope, as some did, that the rift in the Methodist Episcopal Church could yet be healed.

Were Harrisonburg’s southern members simply less conscientious about the political fate of the country? Evidence suggests otherwise. Their concerns for the political implications of religious division may have been every bit as great as the north’s, though grounded in an entirely different logic. For there were some who argued that political union would be strengthened by a division of the church. The widely respected William Capers, who, as a bishop of the M. E. Church, South, would personally welcome the society in Harrisonburg into the southern fold, expressed this view well in the *Southern Christian Advocate*, a Methodist newspaper out of South Carolina:

> The prospect for peace and amicable relations is infinitely better with a separation than under a forced and nominal union. And if so, the safety of the country is to a much greater extent bound up with a division of the church, than a continued union. The division of the Methodist Episcopal Church will demonstrate this fact to the country, that southern forbearance has its limits, and that a vigorous and united resistance will be made at all costs, to the spread of the pseudo-religious frenzy called abolitionism. Thus, a check will be put upon a movement which, more than all other causes of discord put together, threatens the political union. All thinking men in the south will unhesitatingly agree as to the soundness and sagacity of this view of the subject.\(^9^3\)

\(^9^2\) Mathews, 282.
\(^9^3\) Goen, 85.
There is little doubt that the leaders of the southern party at Harrisonburg were among those “thinking men.” What is beyond doubt is that those men felt themselves “constrained respectfully to decline the overture of compromise,” offered by the northern party, seeing in it “no material variation in the terms it proposes, from those offered us by the late Baltimore Conference.” They “might have hoped,” had the Conference not pledged its steadfast allegiance to the M. E. Church, that “the continued Abolition agitation, which, judging from the past is to be anticipated, would at length drive the Conference from its Northern connection into the bosom of the Southern Church, where they would find a quiet retreat, at least from the painful and exciting strife.” But it was too late. Compromise was no longer possible.94

A Missionary Field for the South

Israel was slow to accept the impossibility of reconciliation. But he was willing to dispense with conciliatory language long enough to confront the south over their refusal to pay the circuit’s duly appointed preachers. On May 21, just nine days after drafting the letter of compromise, he addressed another letter to southern members Peachey Harrison, Jacob Rohr, Sr., Abraham Smith, F. G. Way and John Rohr inquiring whether they desired “to continue ... as stewards and leaders in the M. E. Church ... severally submitting to the authority of those who have been sent in the order of the church to labor for your good.” By withholding their preachers’ support, they had violated “important provisions of the discipline.” Israel was “bound therefore by official obligation and

94 Peachey Harrison and Jacob Rohr, Sr. to John S. Effinger and others, May 14, 1846, Chancery Causes.
solemn vow not tamely to submit to such an infraction.” Still clinging to the mantle of diplomacy, however, he hastened to add that he had “no feelings other than those of respect and kindness” toward those “brethren venerable for age and experience” to whom the church had “been accustomed to look for counsel.” He expressed his sincere hope “that something yet can be done to reconcile our differences,” asking if there was “anything so vitally important in the matters in dispute, as to render it entirely impracticable for us to live together in love and Christian fellowship.” Perhaps, he suggested, they might “act upon a maxim sometimes necessary and ‘agree to disagree’.” He would even concede that, due to the constraints imposed upon them by the Plan of Separation, they were “denied a privilege [sic] all should have accorded them; viz: of choosing their own church association.”

In a reply whose stilted decorum might easily pass for sarcasm, the members in question explained that they “thought it most prudent and perhaps the most advisable, to decline surrendering our official Trusts, which course seems to have been invited by your communication.” At the same time, they reciprocated Israel’s momentary firmness by presenting a new set of resolutions leaving no mistake about their own position:

1 – That it is our intention to attach ourselves to the M. E. Church, South at the earliest opportunity practicable, in accordance with the “Plan of Separation.”

2 – That we intend to retain our membership in the Balt. Conference until we can carry out the purpose declared in the above resolution.

3 – That we repeal the resolution passed by us on the 3rd day of April last in which we declared that we would not receive or pay the preachers sent us by the Balt. Conference at its last session.

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95 G. W. Israel to Jacob Rohr, Sr., Abraham Smith, Peachey Harrison, Ferdinand G. Way, and John Rohr, May 21, 1846, Chancery Causes.
96 Jacob Rohr, Sr., Peachey Harrison, Ferdinand G. Way, Abraham Smith, and John Rohr to G. W. Israel, May 25, 1846, Chancery Causes.
Despite the unequivocal nature of the first resolution, the concession represented by
the third revived Israel’s hopes that the two parties could yet be reconciled. Because they
had returned to compliance with the *Discipline*, the southern class leaders and stewards
were continued in their official positions by the next quarterly conference of the circuit.
Israel thought that perhaps “the whole difficulty would there terminate.” Confident that
the southern party “could not attach themselves to the Methodist Episcopal Church South
according to the provisions of the Plan of Separation” because several northern societies
stood between them and the Virginia Conference boundary, Israel held out hope that the
members of the Harrisonburg congregation might yet “forget all that has been unpleasant
in the past, and heartily cooperate ... to promote unity of feeling and effort for the
future.”

If the controversy at Harrisonburg appeared to have subsided, it was only because
members of the southern party were quietly biding their time until their neighbors to the
east had had the chance to maneuver their way into the southern church and thus pave the
way for Harrisonburg to do the same. Indeed, the earlier resolution to withhold support
for the Rockingham Circuit preachers was revoked not for Israel’s sake nor in deference
to the Baltimore Conference. Rather, it was rescinded in order that the northern party
would not be able to use a deviation from the *Discipline* to discredit the south in any
future contest for control of the church.

Heading east from Harrisonburg, one might have encountered any one of several
Methodist societies before reaching the Virginia Conference border at the top of the Blue

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97 Deposition of George W. Israel; John S. Effinger (as secretary) to P. Harrison and others.
98 Deposition of J. Mitchell Conrad.
The following Methodist societies are indicated on the map reading clockwise from far left: Harrisonburg, Dean’s Class, Smith’s Chapel, Mountain Chapel, Elk Run, Yancey’s Schoolhouse, McGaheysville.\(^9^9\)

Ridge Mountains. The Elk Run society, located some sixteen miles east of Harrisonburg, and roughly six or seven miles from the crest of the Blue Ridge, seems to have been the largest of these, with about sixty-five members. The Mountain Chapel (a.k.a., Swift Run Gap) society, with about forty members, lay several miles southeast of Elk Run along the Swift Run Gap road near the foot of the Blue Ridge. Smith’s Chapel, of unknown size but undoubtedly small, was situated several miles northeast of Elk Run. Three other tiny groups of Methodists, consisting perhaps of no more than a dozen members each, constituted Dean’s class near the Shenandoah Iron Works to the north and the classes at Yancey’s Schoolhouse and McGaheysville, both close to the main road from Elk Run to

Harrisonburg. The position, both ecclesiastical and geographical, of each of these societies would eventually figure into the legal arguments intended to decide whether or not Harrisonburg had the right under the Plan of Separation to attach itself to the M. E. Church, South.

Things finally seemed to break in favor of Harrisonburg’s southern party on Saturday, October 24, 1846, when an assembly of Methodists gathered in the rugged, two-story frame meeting house at Elk Run. Along with most of the male members of that society, there were a few men in attendance representing Dean’s class and Mountain Chapel. This was no ordinary church gathering. This solemn group of men had met to vote on whether or not they should leave the Baltimore Conference and adhere to the southern church.

This was not the first time that such a matter had been addressed at Elk Run. Dr. S. B. Jennings, a lay leader of that congregation, recalled a quarterly conference held there in January of 1845 where a motion was made for the attendees to express their views on the imminent division of the M. E. Church. The presiding elder of the district, the Reverend N. J. Brown Morgan, overruled that motion and adjourned the conference before any further action could be taken. Undeterred, the other members took it upon themselves to organize a second meeting immediately afterwards. At that meeting, recounted Jennings, “preamble and resolutions were introduced and read” concerning events at the recent General Conference, which he had “every reason to believe would have been unanimously adopted ... had not Mr. Morgan interfered.” Before any vote

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100 The description of the Elk Run church is taken from the Elkton Historical Society website, accessed November 20, 2013, elktonva.gov/historical.html.
could be taken, Morgan “came into the meeting uninvited, and besought [them] to take no
decided step in separating themselves from the Baltimore Conference.”101

In fact, no such action was then directly under consideration as the resolutions were
merely “condemnatory of the course pursued by the General Conference in regard to
Bishop Andrew.” But the presiding elder was anxious to deter any premature notions of
joining the southern church that would soon be formed. Morgan counseled patience,
recalled Jennings, assuring everyone there that “he was as southern in his feelings, as any
of us, and when the proper time arrived, he would go south as soon as any of us; that he
had no doubt the Baltimore Conference, or a majority of it, were Southern in their
feelings, and that he believed at some early day the Baltimore Conference would assume
southern positions.”102

By the fall of 1846, the Baltimore Conference had not only failed to take a southern
position but had resolutely declared its intention to remain a part of the M. E. Church.
With the Virginia Annual Conference due to meet in nearby Charlottesville within a few
weeks, it must have seemed a propitious time for Elk Run to finally take decisive action.
When the vote was taken there on October 24, the result was unanimous in favor of
adhering to the Church South. The representative from Dean’s class cast a concurring
vote on behalf of his small community. Two men from Mountain Chapel were asked to
inquire whether their society would follow Elk Run’s lead. Word was soon sent back that
twenty-two of the forty members of Mountain Chapel favored going south. At that point,
a memorial was drafted and sent to the Virginia Conference of the M. E. Church, South

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101 Deposition of S. B. Jennings, undated, Chancery Causes.
102 Ibid.
requesting admission for Elk Run, Mountain Chapel and Dean’s class. All three were accepted. The line of division, it seemed, had now been extended as far as Harrisonburg.

Some eight or ten weeks after the Elk Run vote, Israel learned of secret meetings being held by some male members at Harrisonburg “in reference to former difficulties.” Looking into the matter, Israel sought out Dr. Harrison whom he believed “had a considerable influence among those who acted with him.” In a meeting at Harrison’s office, Israel “again sought to bring about a reconciliation between the members of the church and preserve its unity.” But in light of the proceedings at Elk Run, any hope he had nurtured was once and for all extinguished. “The effort,” Israel recalled simply, “was ineffectual.” He finally conceded “there was no prospect of a reconciliation taking place in regard to the church question.”

By the first of March, the southern party had sent a letter to Samuel Moorman, the presiding elder of the Charlottesville District of the Virginia Conference, informing him of their desire for admission into the Church South. Martin A. Dunn, the preacher in charge of the southern Madison Circuit bordering the Blue Ridge to the east, was appointed to visit Harrisonburg to confirm the church’s position. Upon his arrival, Dunn was invited to preach at the regular Wednesday night prayer meeting. As soon as he had finished his homily, Israel took his place in the pulpit. No doubt a certain tension hung in the air as he began with some routine announcements regarding the finances of the circuit in view of the upcoming annual meeting of the Baltimore Conference for which he would be departing in a few days. Israel then asked the class leaders to have their class books on hand the next day so that he could get an accurate membership count to report to the

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103 Deposition of George W. Israel.
Conference. He said he would include anyone in his count who did not expressly ask to be excluded. Finally, he shared some news that must have gotten everyone’s fullest attention.

Israel informed the society of a report he had received from the Reverend Thomas Busey, the preacher in charge of the East Rockingham Circuit, revealing that Mountain Chapel had not elected to go South after all. According to Busey, thirty of its forty members had chosen to remain with the Baltimore Conference. Because Mountain Chapel lay between Elk Run and the conference border, it would seem that the line of division remained unmoved. In view of this development, Israel declared that he “did not see how [Harrisonburg] could, according to any interpretation of the plan of separation, adhere to the Methodist Episcopal Church South” or “how any one was authorised to disturb the peace of the society here on the subject.” At that point, Dr. Harrison and most of the southern cohort unceremoniously exited the church. “There was considerable tumult in the house,” recalled one southern member, “as they were about leaving.”

Paying no heed to Israel’s news, the southern party waited on official confirmation from Bishop William Capers that they would be admitted into the southern church. Some three weeks later, a letter arrived from the bishop. He declared he was “satisfied of the legality of your action,” and had “no doubt of your own competency to determine on its propriety.” A short time later, Capers would come to Harrisonburg to personally welcome the society into the Church South.

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104 Deposition of George W. Israel.; Deposition of Jonathan Clary.
105 William Capers to P. Harrison, J. Clary, A. Smith, F. G. Way, Jacob Rohr, Sr., and John Rohr, 27 March 1847, Chancery Causes.
Despite Capers’ endorsement of the south’s actions, Israel maintained that “no vote of the Society at Harrisonburg was ever taken to ascertain whether they would adhere to the M. E. Church, or the M. E. Church, South.” He contended that “the individuals there who have united with the Church, South ... individually disconnected themselves with the Church, and at different times.”106 Israel and Busey believed they had hard evidence, including sworn statements from the latter’s personal canvass of Mountain Chapel society members, that might persuade Capers that he had made a mistake in admitting Harrisonburg. According to B. N. Brown, the new presiding elder of the Rockingham District, “Rev. Messrs. Israel and Busey drew up full statements of the ‘borders’ and actions in their respective circuits” and “these statements, with a map, were enveloped in a letter to Bishop Capers, as proof that our territory is occupied contrary to the ‘Plan of Separation.’” As of October 1847, some five months after their packet went off, Israel and Busey had received no reply. There is no record that they ever did.107

Brown attributed this apparent brush-off to a typically imperious attitude on the part of Virginians east of the Blue Ridge toward their western compatriots. “Our neighbors of the East have offered us the benefit of their thoughts,” he noted sardonically, “presuming the people of Western Virginia have no right to think for themselves in Church matters. In a political view, the East seems to consider the West a mere colony; and why should we not be considered as a missionary field belonging to the M. E. Church, South?”108

108 Ibid.
Into the Battle

With Dunn now recognized by the south as Harrisonburg’s official preacher, Israel continued to serve the northern minority. The south condescended to allow the northern members use of the church every other week. Gessner Harrison commended his father for “the liberal course you pursue toward these fanatics, in allowing them the use of the church and parsonage,” adding that “it will be better in the effect had on the wavering and undecided, and upon the community.”\(^{109}\) The north, however, could hardly be expected to appreciate such liberality when they believed the church property rightly belonged to them.

Israel, again acting the diplomat, attempted to work out a compromise with the south. The north was willing to give up the meeting house on the hill in exchange for the rest of the church property. Perhaps this was the north’s own idea of a liberal course. The southern response to this offer is probably well represented by Margaret Stevens in a letter to her husband. “I really think [Israel] is the most imputdent man I ever knew,” she wrote on July 21, 1847. “I reckon they thought they were making great restitution by giving up the church, that is if they would let them have the parsonage and sexton’s house, free of debt.” As for Israel, she thought “the best thing to happen [to] him, would be to drum him out of town.”\(^{110}\) Diplomacy was obviously not a winning strategy.

As bargaining gave way to aggression, the north attempted to secure the sexton’s house with or without the consent of the south. The house had previously been sold to the Harrisonburg society “by an order of the quarterly conference of the circuit.”

\(^{109}\) Gessner Harrison to Peachey Harrison, May 20, 1847.

\(^{110}\) Margaret Harrison Stevens to William G. Stevens and Mary Jane Harrison, 21 July 1847, Box 6, Papers of the Tucker, Harrison and Smith Families.
Possibly by another such order, the north sought to reclaim it for the Rockingham Circuit (and hence, for the M. E. Church). The southern reaction was no doubt well expressed by Harrison in a letter to his wife. “The very attempt,” he said of the north’s maneuver, “will be an act of unmitigated fraud.”

The immediate fate of the sexton’s house is unknown. But the record shows that the next target of the north was the parsonage. On October 1, Israel composed a letter to southern trustee Jacob Rohr, Sr. It was short, direct, and contained nothing of the deferential language of his previous letters. He informed Rohr of a resolution that the trustee “be notified by the Preacher in Charge, of his ejectment from the trusteeship in the Parsonage Property, and that he be requested to present his claim with the proper vouchers, to the Board of Trustees for said property for adjustment, and liquidation.”

Thorougly unintimidated, Harrison drafted a letter to Israel some time later informing him that “the house and lot you now occupy in the town of Harrisonburg is my property and that at the expiration of the present [church calendar] year which will be about the first of March 1848 I desire you to surrender the possession of the same to me as I desire then to put therein a tenant of my own selection. It would be agreeable to me for you to inform your friends of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) of this notice that they may propose a tenement for their preacher for the ensuing year.”

That Harrison’s request was, in turn, ignored is confirmed by the memoirs of Israel’s successor from the Baltimore Conference, Wilson Lee Spottswood. “The contest in

111 Dr. Peacheys and Mary Jane Harrison to Mary (Stewart) Harrison, July 30, 1847, Box 6, Papers of the Tucker, Harrison and Smith Families.
112 G. W. Israel to Jacob Rohr, Sr., October 1, 1847, Chancery Causes.
113 Peachey Harrison to G. W. Israel, February 17, 1848, Box 6, Papers of the Tucker, Harrison and Smith Families.
Harrisonburg was about the parsonage,” recalled Spottswood; “we had possession of it, and the ‘South,’ ... were watching for an opportunity to seize it.” He describes his arrival in Harrisonburg in the spring of 1848 as something of a surprise attack. “The ‘South’ supposed I would come in the usual Methodist’s preacher’s style, viz, in my own conveyance; but I came in the public stage-coach, and they were thrown off their guard.” Spottswood quietly dropped off his trunks at the parsonage and rode just a few minutes farther on to Effinger’s house, where he and his family breakfasted. Returning from there to the parsonage, they had just gotten inside when someone arrived with a note from Dr. Harrison. Harrison, whom Spottswood described as “the chief member of the Southern Church,” had meant to warn the new preacher against taking possession of the house. The new preacher passed on a message to Harrison that the doctor’s note had arrived too late. He had already moved in.\footnote{Spottswood, 69-71.}

Soon after Spottswood’s arrival, what he called a “council of war” was gotten together that included Israel and B. N. Brown. The new minister was encouraged by his associates to visit a church in nearby Bridgewater where a southern preacher had appropriated a share of the pulpit. He was asked to challenge the usurper by asking him “by what right or authority he was occupying the Methodist Episcopal Church.” Spottswood, though, was loathe to be seen as a persecutor. He did not want to “fan into a flame the southern element just waiting to burst out.” Having expressed his reservations, he recalled years later, “they told me I was expected to fight, and the sooner I got into the battle the better.”\footnote{Ibid.}
Much Confusion if Not Absurdity

The legal battle in Harrisonburg had begun several months prior to Spottswood’s arrival when Plecker and Effinger filed their bill against the trustees. On May 14, 1848, the southern trustees made their official answer. The single northern trustee, local gunsmith Alexander McGilvray, had filed a separate answer two months earlier in which he affirmed every point made by the plaintiffs. The other trustees repudiated the entire bill, “not confessing or acknowledging all or any of the matters and things in the complainants bill contained, to be true in manner and form.” Maintaining that Harrisonburg “rightly belongs to the Southern division” of the church, they presumed to place the burden of proof entirely upon their opponents, refusing even to acknowledge the resolution adopted by the Baltimore Conference declaring its attachment to the M. E. Church. As if the legitimacy of their position were already established, they reminded the court that the first resolution of the Plan of Separation had guaranteed that “all the property of the Methodist Episcopal Church in meeting houses, parsonages, ... and of every kind within the limits of the Southern organization, shall be forever free from any claim set up on the part of the Methodist Church [North].”

The defendants’ counsel followed up this answer with a demurrer requesting that the case be dismissed, claiming that the court had “no jurisdiction of this subject in controversy.” Having gotten that rather essential, if unexplained, point out of the way, they went on to argue that, since the bill had, in effect, asserted “that the control, and enjoyment of the property belongs to the Baltimore Conference, and that the ministers

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116 The joint answer of George Sites, Michael Harris, Jacob Rohr, John Rohr and Abraham Smith, May 14, 1848, Chancery Causes.
designated by said conference alone, have the right to the use, enjoyment, and control of the pulpit ... the ministers so designated and appointed, are the only parties injured.” Only those ministers, they insisted, could “legitimately institute legal proceedings for a redress of the [purported] injury done by the trustees.” Finally, they maintained that if the ministers were in fact the injured parties, the appropriate action of the court was not to conduct a trial, but merely to issue a mandamus ordering the trustees to perform their duties according to the requirements of the trust. No doubt the defense would have argued that the trustees were already doing just that. But that proved unnecessary. The demurrer was summarily overruled.117

In the legal proceedings that ensued, the south was represented, first of all, by John Kenney, commonwealth’s attorney in the circuit court. He would become judge of that same court four years later. He was assisted by his son, James, another future circuit court judge for Rockingham County. Also with Kenney were J. H Samuels and J. Letcher. The latter was quite likely John Letcher, a young lawyer from nearby Lexington who would serve as Virginia’s governor during the Civil War.118 For the north, there was Alexander Hugh Holmes Stuart, a former member of the U. S. House of Representatives and future Secretary of the Interior under Millard Fillmore; Algernon Sydney Gray, who would serve as a dissenting delegate to Virginia’s secession convention and, after the war, as the U. S. Marshall for the Western District of Virginia; and Greene B. Samuels who would succeed Daniel Smith, the presiding judge in the case, on the bench.

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117 Demurrer, May 16, 1848, Chancer Causes.
118 No other attorney named J. Letcher appears in the 1850 census records for Virginia.
The taking of depositions commenced on August 29. Much of the information solicited concerned the physical locations and sectarian leanings of various Methodist societies in the Rockingham and East Rockingham circuits. Because Mountain Chapel’s affiliation with the southern church had been thrown into doubt, the south’s case seemed to depend upon the claim that the nearer Elk Run society was, and always had been, a border society. No one questioned Elk Run’s decision to adhere to the South. Significantly, neither circuits nor societies had strictly defined geographical boundaries. The southern party argued that a society’s geographical coverage in any direction extended as far as its most distant member’s place of residence. One witness for the defense testified that the “Elk Run society had several members living in the mountains in the direction of the border,” adding that “one of its members lived immediately on the top of the Blue Ridge, and within a few feet of the border between the Virginia and Baltimore Conferences.”

Adding to the widespread “controversy in the papers of both churches” that “resulted simply in creating hatred,” the question of Mountain Chapel’s affiliation and Elk Run’s border status became yet more grist of contention among sparring Methodist newspapers. In the Richmond Christian Advocate, the aforementioned letter writer calling himself “South” affirmed the claim that an Elk Run family lived “within a few feet of the border line.” Moreover, it was the house of this family, reported “South,” that Bishop Capers had first encountered when he crossed over into the East Rockingham Circuit on his way to Harrisonburg in the spring of 1847. It was this encounter, he

119 Deposition of S. B. Jennings.
suggested, that “for aught we know, prevented [Capers] from ‘withdrawing his preachers,’ even after having been shown that some other classes [i.e., congregations or societies] had not gone South, for he expressly declares that Elk run [like Mountain Chapel] was a border society.”\textsuperscript{121}

But then, according to “South,” it really did not matter whether Elk Run qualified as a border society or not since Mountain Chapel had, in fact, elected to adhere to the southern church contrary to the purported findings of the Reverend Thomas Busey. That election had been provoked by the preacher’s persistent neglect of Mountain Chapel, claimed “South,” adding that Busey “scarcely deigned to turn out of his way to preach to them,” and “regarded the appointment of so little importance that he did not think it necessary to continue his ministerial labors among them.” When Busey, who had attributed his absence to poor health, learned of the vote, he suddenly become zealous to attend to the society, alleged “South,” while “his old dyspeptic and hypochondriac symptoms were all forgotten.” “South” admitted that Busey had perhaps “since succeeded in changing several of the majority” in their choice of church affiliation, but added that “unfortunately for him, it is a little too late.” The society had already been accepted into the Church South.\textsuperscript{122}

“South” also condemned the efforts of Busey and Israel to convince Bishop Capers that Harrisonburg was not a border society. The two preachers had purportedly told the bishop of a society at McGaheysville, between Elk Run and Harrisonburg, that had remained attached to the northern church, thereby preventing the border from advancing

\textsuperscript{121} “Border Difficulties,” \textit{Richmond Christian Advocate}, November 4, 1847.\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Ibid.}
further west. But “little did they dream that in one short month,” exalted South, “the Bishop would pass along the road from Elk Run to Harrisonburg, and learn for himself that there was not, nor never has been a society or class at McGaheysville.”

“South” extended his rancor to northern preachers in general, whom he claimed had done all they could to mislead members of the East Rockingham Circuit. “I am well convinced that the whole of E. Rockingham circuit would long since have adhered South,” he said. “But whenever a society or a member spoke of taking action, they kindly interposed and besought them to wait, ‘wait and let us all go together; we are with you and intend to go with you at the proper time, – and the Baltimore Conference is with you, as it has frequently shown you, and as we will also show you at its next session; it has slaveholding territory, what have you to fear?’” It was through “this kind of Jesuitism,” he grumbled, that “we were thus prevailed upon to wait ... lulled to sleep and quietness,” while from the north “an undercurrent” was at work. As pamphlets were “distributed in abundance;” and some areas “visited with a zeal and industry never before known,” those parts of the circuit known to favor the south “were in a great degree neglected.”

Writing first to The Richmond Christian Advocate by whom he was ignored, Busey penned a letter in his defense to Dr. Bond, editor of the Christian Advocate and Journal, which was published on January 12, 1848. Claiming he had been “palpably misrepresented,” Busey refuted “South”’s contention that he had neglected to attend to his duties at Mountain Chapel and challenged “South”’s assertion that there had never

123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
been a society at McGaheysville. “The first thing to be considered,” said Busey with regard to the latter issue, “is what constitutes a Methodist society.” Drawing from the *Discipline* of the M. E. Church, he noted that “a society is no other than a company of men, having the form, and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.” By that understanding, declared Busey, a society had existed at McGaheysville for almost four years. He granted that he had recently relocated a society that had formerly met at Yancey’s School House to McGaheysville, a few miles further west. But he had done this, he insisted, because it was more convenient for the members and not for the sake of establishing a northern society in the path of Harrisonburg.

Going beyond the defensiveness of Busey’s rebuttal, *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal* came down hard on Bishop Capers and “the seceders at Harrisonburg.” Considering Capers’ visit to Harrisonburg to admit the society there into the Church South, *Zion’s Herald* maintained that even if Mountain Chapel or any other individual society went south, the southern church’s assumption of authority was an “open and palpable violation of the ‘Plan of Separation’.” For the fact remained that “cross the mountain where he would, by any known public road, the Bishop must pass preaching places and societies of the M. E. Church [North] in order to reach Harrisonburg.” Though the Bishop might “by a route as crooked as a worm fence, avoid seeing them ...
these intervening [north] adhering societies are nevertheless there, and right in the way of the union of Harrisonburg and the Virginia Conference."125

Questions of geography would consume much of the testimony in the Harrisonburg trial. How far was one society from another in a given direction? How would one have likely travelled to get from one society to another? Where did the most outlying members of a given society reside? In the end, none of these pedantic details about geography proved relevant to the outcome of the case.

“The only question which has been raised and argued by the counsel in this cause,” observed presiding judge Daniel Smith, “is, as to the true construction of the 1st resolution in the plan of separation.” Smith was convinced that the only valid construction was the one that equated the line of division with the conference borders of 1844 and that held that line to be fixed. Consequently, every effort on the part of the defense was ultimately irrelevant to his decision. The defendants had undertaken to prove that Elk Run bordered the line of division, that Elk Run had adhered south, that Elk Run adjoined the Harrisonburg society and that Harrisonburg had by a vote of a majority of its members elected to go south. “Whether the defendants have succeeded in establishing all or any of those propositions,” said Smith, “I deem it entirely unnecessary to enquire, for if all be conceded to them, it would still remain to be shewn that the Elk Run Society, as a border society, having adhered to the Southern Church, had thereby changed the established line of division between the Southern and Northern churches.” In Smith’s view, that line had not been changed. Harrisonburg remained an interior

society ineligible under the Plan of Separation to join the Church South. Any other construction of the first resolution, believed Smith, “would lead to much confusion if not absurdity.”

Given the assumption that the line of division coincided with the annual conference borders separating the M. E. Church from the M. E. Church, South, an assumption the southern party effectively conceded, the logic behind Smith’s conclusion would seem difficult to refute. Were it to be imagined, posed Smith, “that there should be a Society on the East of the Blue Ridge, immediately opposite the Elk Run Society, bounding on the top of the Ridge, wishing to adhere to the Northern Church, would it be said that the Elk Run Society had, by their act, changed the line of division so as to deprive the opposite Society of the right of election given by the General Conference?” The only way to preserve the right of the opposite society would be to create a second line of division. “It can hardly be supposed,” suggested Smith, “that the General Conference intended to establish any rule or plan of separation leading to such confusion.” On such logical grounds, the judge rendered his decision on May 17, 1850 in favor of the north.

Refusing to submit to any such reasoning, the southern party turned to the Court of Appeals of Virginia (what is now the Virginia Supreme Court). In their appeal, the petitioners contended “that the line of division referred to in the 1st resolution of the plan of separation was the line between the free and slave territory,” adding that even if the line of division “was the line separating the conferences adhering south, and those

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126 Judge’s Opinion, May 17, 1850, Chancery Causes.
127 Ibid.
adhering north ... the [Harrisonburg] congregation ... was still a border society.”\[^{128}\]

Hedging their case, they furthermore insisted that “the Baltimore conference, containing part free and part slave territory, is thereby made a border conference, and any society in that conference, by the [plan] of separation, are [sic] at liberty to attach itself to the other church, whether it is a border society or not.”\[^{129}\] No record of this appeal is to be found in the published compendia of Virginia Supreme Court cases. But it appears that the appellants got no further with their arguments the second time around. On the cover of the only known printed transcript of some of the original handwritten documents pertaining to the case, apparently prepared by the court for the benefit of the justices’ review, a notation has been added beneath the name of the case that simply states “aff’d” (affirmed).\[^{130}\]

Conclusion

Douglas Ambrose has argued that “in Virginia ... most Methodists had joined the emerging proslavery consensus by 1810,” though he allows for the likelihood that some Methodists, “especially those residing west of the Blue Ridge, continued to harbor antislavery sympathies.”\[^{131}\] Clearly, an impassioned opposition to slavery did exist among leaders of the Rockingham Circuit well into the first decades of the nineteenth century.

\[^{128}\] George Sites, et al., *Cout* [sic] of Appeals of Virginia. Sites, etc., *vs. Harrison, etc.*, (Lewisburg, WV: The Court of Appeals of Virginia, 1853), 2. This transcript of court documents pertaining to the appeal of the Rockingham County chancery court case entitled *John R. Plecker, etc. vs. Peachy Harrison, etc.* is misnamed on the first page of the transcript and in the handwritten title on the front cover. Sites and Harrison were, in fact, co-defendants in the original case.

\[^{129}\] Ibid., 5.

\[^{130}\] For unknown reasons, this copy of the case transcript has the name of the Virginia attorney and later Confederate general, Jubal A. Early, prominently handwritten on the cover.

Some remnant of that opposition may have persisted in Harrisonburg up to the time of the Methodist schism. By that time, though, a proslavery ideology that went at least as far as fervent anti-abolitionism predominated on both sides of the partisan controversy that ensued there.

The Harrisonburg case serves well to illustrate the irony of such partisanship originating in a conflict over slavery. While the Methodist schism at the denominational level closely paralleled the sectional antagonism over slavery that was moving the nation closer to civil war, local Methodist disputes provoked by that schism, like the one in Harrisonburg, were much more closely aligned with a regional ambivalence confined to the South, particularly to its border regions. This was the ambivalence that characterized the seemingly paradoxical position of pro-union slaveholders as the South edged closer to secession.

A notable example of this latter parallel can be drawn directly from the Harrisonburg case. Algernon Sydney Gray, a lawyer representing the northern party, lived and practiced law in Harrisonburg. But he was also a gentleman farmer with land in Roanoke county worked by nine of the slaves he owned. His father was Robert Gray, the wealthiest citizen of Rockingham county, himself both a lawyer and a farmer with real estate valued at the then very substantial sum of $50,000 worked by seventeen of his own slaves. Though Algernon Gray, along with the family into which he was born, had a strong vested interest in the institution of slavery, he was adamantly opposed to secession. As a delegate to the Virginia Convention of 1861, notes John Wayland, “he

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tried all measures to avoid secession, moving the assemblage to tears as he depicted what would be the ‘most mournful Iliad in the history of the world’. 133 Surely, the northern Methodist preachers of the Rockingham District had something very similar in mind in 1844, when they compared the debate over slavery to “a mighty volcano ... whose fires but wait an opportunity to pour forth their scorching flames through the lengths and breadths of the land.”134

Eventually, the exigencies of political geography would subsume the loyalties of many who were opposed to secession as well as those once opposed to ecclesiastical disunion. Once the war commenced, the Virginia portion of the Baltimore Conference was cut off from the rest of the conference. This left that portion of the Baltimore Conference estranged as well from the influence of its more northern-minded preachers. Having functioned as an essentially independent conference during the war, what remained of the Baltimore Conference in Virginia was incorporated within the Virginia Conference of the M. E. Church, South in 1866. In that same year, the two Methodist factions in Harrisonburg reunited. While the causative role that religious schism may have played in the onset of the Civil War remains a debatable issue, the fact that the war was responsible for bringing Harrisonburg’s briefly independent Methodist congregations together again is clear. And so the war that restored political union wrought yet another paradox in the realm of religion. At the same time that it led to the kind of reunification at a regional level that Harrisonburg experienced, it fostered a more complete

133 Wayland, A History of Rockingham County, 353.
134 “Protest Against the Division of the M. E. Church,” Christian Advocate and Journal, November 4, 1844, American Periodicals Series.
institutional separation at the national level that, in the case of the Methodist Church, would persist for nearly another four-score years.
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