

“White Privilege at Work in the Early Methodist Mission to Liberia”
The Story of the Rev. George S. Brown,
Early African American Missionary

In 1827, an African American named George S. Brown, born a free man in Newport, RI, in 1801, found himself in Kingsbury, NY, to “dry out” after many years of alcohol and merriment.¹

A few years after his arrival there, he was converted by the Baptists; shortly thereafter, however, he met Methodist circuit rider, William Ryder, whom he described as a “holy ghost man,” and he felt called by God to become an “Episcopal Methodist” and preach the gospel. He received a license to exhort in April, 1831, and a license to preach in July, 1833.

Word has been handed down...from people who lived during his preaching that such crowds came to hear him that no building was large enough to hold them and that many hundreds were soundly converted through the exhortations of this inspired Negro.²

Shortly after Brown received his license to preach, he also began to experience a call to the missionary field in Liberia. The brethren of the Troy Conference advised that he receive further education, however, which proved somewhat difficult for him. Everywhere he went, Brown met up with people who did not know the Lord, and he could not resist the urge to preach to them – which interfered with his attending school.

His sister and brother-in-law, Rhoda and Calvin Swan, offered to board him so that he could attend high school in Northfield, MA, where they lived. Though he did eventually go to Northfield, he just could not resist preaching along the way and never did attend school. Following that experience, the Rev. Sherman Minor and the Presiding Elder, Cyrus Prindle, made arrangements for him to travel to Vermont and study under a local preacher, the Rev. S[amuel] Tupper in Monkton. This experience was not a positive one, either.

Brown was forbidden to preach more than once a week on Sunday mornings but again was unable to resist the urge. He found a favorable congregation in nearby Ferrisburgh where he was apparently a better preacher than the assigned circuit rider. Though Brown chooses not to name him, he does report in his *Journal*, how negatively he was treated by this particular preacher who:

raised a great hue and cry in that place, telling them that I was unlearned, and that my language was not grammatical, and what a reproach it was to the people to hear a colored man preach. But the worst of it all was, he said that I had robbed him of his congregation; when, in fact, he preached six miles north of me in the forenoon, and four miles in the afternoon.³

This same man then prevailed upon Rev. Tupper to end his tutoring sessions with Brown, and he was subsequently sent back to New York.

Brown eventually attended Cazenovia Seminary (the Genesee Conference School) in the Central New York area, completed his education, and sailed to Liberia in October, 1836.⁴ Though he was originally employed as a teacher to the native Africans (not the slaves who were being relocated there), he could not refrain from preaching there, either, and was eventually received on trial in the Liberia Conference in January, 1838, and elected to deacon’s and elder’s orders.

Brown subsequently sailed back to America where he was ordained as a deacon on one day and as an elder the next at the annual conference held at the John Street MEC on March 25 and 26,

1838. On February 14, 1839, Brown was then received as a full member of the Liberia Annual Conference.⁵ It is important to remember that during this period in the MEC African Americans were only allowed to become members of missionary conferences; they could not become members of annual conferences in the United States.

In 1839, George S. Brown married Nancy Wilson, the daughter of one of the other Black preachers in Liberia. She died seven months later. In 1841, Brown married Harriet Ann Harper. They had a daughter, Hannah Ann, who died of whooping cough in May, 1843.⁶

Wade C. Barclay, in his *History of Methodist Missions*, describes Brown's service in Africa:

During the early years much of the success of the Liberia Mission was due to the faithful labors of Negro Local Preachers... George S. Brown, a preacher of unusual ability, emigrated to Liberia in 1837, and shortly thereafter established a mission school in "the Pessah country" named Heddington in honor of Bishop Hedding. At the meeting of the Board on July 22, 1839, a letter from Brown was read, describing his school, and stating that the kings of several neighboring tribes were "earnestly imploring teachers and missionaries."

From Heddington, the interior station, fifty-nine conversions were reported, and missionary George S. Brown, elated, wrote to Superintendent Seys:

Come up and see the bush burn. Come up and see the desert blossom. Come up and see God convert the heathen. Do not stop to change your clothes.⁷

Unfortunately, shortly thereafter, Brown began to experience difficulties with the white superintendents because he refused to become involved in a political battle between superintendent, John Seys, and the Liberian Governor, Thomas Buchanan, over whether or not taxes should be charged on goods being imported from America for the colonists. Superintendent Seys wanted all of his preachers to support him on this issue. Not surprisingly, however, Brown decided he had no desire to become embroiled in a political struggle. "I am sent here to save souls, and I therefore feel it my duty to keep entirely clear from all such difficulties."

In January, 1841, Brown requested and was granted location status. He then traveled to America to meet with the Missionary Board to obtain authorization to travel further into the interior to establish a new mission. John Seys, who had been recalled to the States due to the controversy, traveled with Brown on the same ship.

At the end of January, 1842, Brown set sail once again for Africa with authorizations from the Board to go deeper into the interior of Liberia to establish a new mission. He sailed with Rev. Squire Chase, who was to replace John Seys as superintendent of the Liberia Mission.

The Annual Conference commenced on March 31 and the question of Brown's re-admittance to the Conference was raised. He states that, "When I located from this conference last year, there was not one word of objection against my moral character, or any doctrine which I have at any time preached." As soon as the question of his re-admittance was raised, however, objections were made about statements he had made in America regarding cannibalism among some of the African natives, along with the fact that he was a strong holiness preacher. While this did not seem to have been a problem in the United States, Brown's holiness doctrines were apparently very unpopular among the white preachers in Liberia. After addressing the

concerns that were raised, he withdrew his request for re-admittance since his agreement in America with the Board of the Missionary Society was that he should establish the new mission whether or not he re-joined the traveling connection.

Brown spent the next few months preparing for a major foray into the interior to Goloo country – further inland than any other missionary had ever ventured. But when he went to meet with Superintendent Chase to settle his account prior to leaving for what Brown assumed might be a year or more at the new mission, the Superintendent “protested my entire account of all my expenses which I have been at, since I arrived from America,” called Brown a liar, and even referred to him as a “black *scoundrel*.”

At the Quarterly Conference in January, 1843, Brown was suspended from all services in the Church. Superintendent Chase left suddenly in March for America and subsequently wrote Brown a letter which he did not receive until September, fully discharging him from any further service in Liberia. The Superintendent authorized Brown’s salary but nothing for the \$791 worth of expenses he had incurred.

In the meantime, Squire Chase died a few weeks after his arrival in America, and John Seys was once again sent to Liberia to superintend the mission. On January 1, 1844, at the fifth Quarterly Conference held in Monrovia, George S. Brown was expelled from the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁸

In *White Americans in Black Africa*, in which she analyzed the mission and colonization movement of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Liberia, Eunjin Park states that “the Seys-Buchanan controversy eventually laid a fatal blow to the cause of native missions by provoking the withdrawal of the missionary who was more devoted to African evangelization than anyone else: George S. Brown, the champion of the Heddington mission station project.”⁹

On January 28 Brown sailed for America, leaving his wife behind – no doubt believing that he would settle his disagreements with the Missionary Board relatively quickly, have his credentials restored, and return to Africa and his duties there. He arrived in Baltimore on April 4 and on April 9 visited the Book Room of the Board of the Missionary Society in New York and shared with them his reason for coming to America. He submitted a bill for \$1,123. It would not be until September, however, after several trips to meet with them, that the Board of Missions finally reviewed his papers and issued Brown a check for \$700, minus \$423 for charges incurred in attempting to settle his claim.

He then set about attempting to re-establish his membership in the MEC at Glen’s Falls, on the Fort Ann Circuit. He was strongly opposed, however, by two men, George and James Harvey, the latter of whom would become a strong adversary. On December 8, Rev. Seymour Coleman, “...offered my name to the church as a probationer, and called on them for a vote, for or against my joining the society [at Glen’s Falls]. And with the exception of one man who did not vote at all, I obtained a unanimous vote.”¹⁰

In July, 1845, Brown attended a meeting of the Fort Ann Quarterly Conference in which his credentials of ordination were to have been tested, inasmuch as he had been expelled from the church in Liberia. When he arrived, however, Brother E. B. Hubbard, the preacher-in-charge, showed Brown a letter from the Rev. John Seys, “...of the blackest kind – as if he set himself to see and show how mischievously and contemptibly he could set forth my moral character.” Although Brown objected, the letter was read before the whole body, having already been

circulated among the preachers. The Conference refused Brown the privilege of responding to the accusations in the letter, instead appointing a committee of seven, including James Harvey, to investigate the charges and report to the next Quarterly Conference. “And thus I am again suspended from preaching for three months – But I, being, or claiming to be a human being, though not white-skinned, have human feelings...”¹¹

Brown met twice with the committee and James Harvey continued to block the proceedings. The committee took no action and without explanation made no report to the next Quarterly Conference which met on October 11. Moreover, at that meeting, the Presiding Elder informed Brown that the appropriate place to present his request was to the local society.

Thus, on October 19, Brown reported that he had written his application to the society for a license to preach and was rejected after James Harvey once again demanded a reading of the Seys’ letters. “...But they were very frank here, just as they were at Fort Ann, last July, to repeat again and again, that there were no objections against me excepting the Seys’ letter[s].” Finally, the Presiding Elder, E.B. Hubbard, “decided that, being Br Seys was a white man and wrote so pointedly, and strong, that they were bound to receive his report...”¹²

Brown was then advised it was his responsibility to prove that Seys’ accusations were wrong – even though he had been given no opportunity to do so during any of the previous proceedings. Thus, reluctant as he was to do so, Brown decided his only recourse was to bring a civil suit for slander against John Seys. He hired the Hon. Henry B. Northup, from Sandy Hill, NY, as his counsel. This action then caused some of Brown’s enemies to bring him to trial for filing a suit against Seys. At this trial, held in December, 1845, Brown was expelled from the Fort Ann Circuit and the M.E. Church yet again.

Brown continued to pursue his civil suit against John Seys despite numerous delays, an unsuccessful attempt on the part of the Seys’ lawyers to get him to drop the suit, and an attempt to change the venue for the trial from Albany to New York City.

Finally, Seys’ witnesses from Africa arrived in July, 1848, two and a half years after Brown was expelled from the Glens Falls Society; he and his lawyer were summoned to NYC for the taking of affidavits from these witnesses. Though the witnesses were “flat against” Brown, Henry Northup proved to be extremely skillful in drawing the truth from these witnesses and after about a week, Seys’ lawyers apparently realized how weak their case was and rather abruptly proposed to settle. Brown records that on August 2nd at 5PM, the following document was drawn up, and he dropped his suit.

SUPREME COURT – George S. Brown vs. John Seys

The publications complained of in the declaration in this case, are, by the undersigned defendant’s attorney, hereby withdrawn, and plaintiff is paid one hundred and fifty dollars in full, and amicable settlement of this suit.

HENRY B. NORTHUP, Plaintiff’s Attorney

ASA CHILDS, Attorney for the Defendant

New York August 2d, 1848.¹³

The finalization of Geo. S. Brown’s suit essentially marks the end of his *Journal*, which was published in 1849, the final few pages consisting only of Brown’s praise of his God, who had been with him through all of these trials and who brought him safely through the many storms he had had to endure – though he still had not yet had his credentials restored. (*pause*)

In 1850, Henry Boardman Taylor was elected and ordained an elder in the Troy Conference and appointed to the Warren, NY, Circuit. At the first Quarterly Conference of 1851 Taylor was then appointed to the Johnsbury charge, and he received Brown into his church. Brown was granted a license to exhort and to preach, and then assisted Taylor greatly in revival work.

At the [1852] Conference, however, [Taylor] was arraigned by his Presiding Elder, S. Washburn, for mal-administration of Discipline in receiving a man who had been expelled on another charge. Fortified with a letter from E. Hedding, oldest Bishop of the church, he was, after a trial in open Conference, acquitted by a nearly unanimous vote. He was then sent to [the] Berkshire [VT] Circuit, with residence at Montgomery, Vt.¹⁴

Taylor took Brown with him to the Berkshire Circuit, where he apparently then recommended to the Quarterly Conference that Brown's preaching credentials be restored, for the original handwritten minutes of the 1853 Troy Conference read:

Wednesday Afternoon, May 18th, 1853:

G.S. Brown's Credentials	J. Frazer, P.E. of St. Albans District, presented the recommendation of the Quarterly Conference of Berkshire Circuit, asking for the restoration of the credentials of Geo. S. Brown, an Elder in the Methodist E. Church.
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On motion vote that his credentials be restored.¹⁵

Thus, after more than ten years of struggle and pain caused by the racism and white privilege of many in the Methodist Episcopal Church, George S. Brown was restored to his status as an elder. It is interesting that he had to move to Vermont before that could happen, however.

Then, to make a longer story shorter, since I am nearly out of time, in 1855 Brown was apparently sent by the Presiding Elder to the little town of Wolcott, VT. In but a few months, he gathered a congregation large enough to sustain a full-time pastor and the following year in 1856, he appointed seven white Trustees, and oversaw the construction of the building which still stands today as the *only* white United Methodist church in the United States that was organized by an African American pastor, who then oversaw the construction of the church. He remained through 1857 and then left due to ill health to return to the Glen's Falls area in New York, where he lived out the remainder of his life, not dying until 1886.

I have given you a brochure which gives an overview of the current historic restoration project which we have undertaken to preserve the building and thus the history of this amazing man, who chose to stay with the Methodist Episcopal Church, despite the incredible amount of racism and white privilege which he experienced. At the end of his *Journal* Brown states, "O but still, I call heaven to witness, that I truly love the M. E. Church with all my whole soul. I love her none the less for what a few individuals have mangled me."¹⁶

As we look to the future of our beloved United Methodist Church in this particular time of turmoil, George S. Brown's words continue to ring in my ears as so many of us wonder if this is the time that we should leave or stay and fight for the church that we love and serve.

¹ Katharine M. and George A. Webster, *A History of the First Methodist Church of Sanford's Ridge* (Webster Mimed Service, August 1960) pages unnumbered; hereafter cited as Webster. William W. Larowe, *From Circuit Rider to Episcopacy* (Granville, NY: Grastorf Press, 1970) 33-36.

² Webster, unnumbered.

³ Geo. S. Brown, *Brown's Abridged Journal, Containing a Brief Account of the Life, Trials and Travels of Geo. S. Brown, Six Years a Missionary in Liberia, West Africa: A Miracle of God's Grace* (Troy, NY: Press of Prescott & Wilson, 1849)22-33.

⁴ This would have been a school equivalent to our high schools not a training institution for ministers.

⁵ *Journal*, 51, 60-61, 74.

⁶ *Journal*, 79, 101-2, 170, 194, 221.

⁷ Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions Part One: Early American Methodism 1769-1844 Vol 1*(New York, NY: Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, 1949)337-339.

⁸ *Journal*, 218, 318, 220-21, 225, 325-343.

⁹ Eunjin Park, *White Americans in Black Africa* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 142.

¹⁰ *Journal*, 241.

¹¹ *Journal*, 248.

¹² *Journal*, 252.

¹³ *Journal*, 282.

¹⁴ Henry Boardman Taylor, *Some Accounts of the Ancestors, Relatives and Family of Henry Boardman Taylor with a Memoir written by Himself and a Supplement by Rev. B. S. Taylor* (1892), 25-26.

¹⁵ *Handwritten Minutes of the 1853 Troy Annual Conference*, 96.

¹⁶ *Journal*, 258.