

## Chapter 8. John Wesley

COLONIAL GEORGIANS by Jeannette Holland Austin

The bad luck of the Wesley brothers was not over. The summer of 1737 brought an unfortunate set of events into the life of John Wesley, rector in Savannah.<sup>1</sup> He had sailed from England in December of 1735. Onboard were 26 Moravians and their bishop, David Nitschmann. They had been to sea for 3 months when an immense storm broke over the ship. While the English passengers screamed in terror, the Moravians were calm, singing hymns. Wesley was impressed with the bishop's peace and serenity, and soon joined them in their private devotions. When they landed in Savannah, the youthful Wesley felt at ease in seeking out the Moravian pastor, Mr. Spangenburg, for advice. At times Wesley lacked the confidence of his own conversion and Spangenburg tested him with the question – "Have you the witness within yourself?" Wesley felt compelled to minister to the savages and wrote in his private journal that the Indians were waiting "like little children to receive and obey the gospel." But Oglethorpe discouraged much venturing outside of the settlement. Wesley's brave first writings soon dissipated. Two years later, he wrote of the Indians

"they are all, except perhaps the Choctaws, gluttons, thieves, dissemblers, liars. They are implacable, murderers of fathers, murderers of mothers, murderers of their own children."

Rev. John Wesley succeeded Rev. Mr. Quincy who had been removed by the Trustees in October of 1735. His message became a new religion, Methodism.

Services were held in the courthouse building in Savannah, on Sunday at 5:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Wesley read prayers in Italian at 9:00 a.m., French at 1:00 p.m., and catechized the children at 2:00 p.m. He also learned Spanish because there were some Spanish Jews in his parish. On one occasion he remarked that 700 communicants in Christ Church had attended; and Savannah was pleasant beyond expectation.

Wesley personally visited all his parishioners, fasted twice weekly, and habitually lived on bread and fruit. He accepted no excuses for absence from worship, and no dissenters could receive communion unless they were re-baptized. His lasting contribution was the Sunday School which he started during those early years.

As rector, Wesley gave a strict interpretation of the liturgy which displeased the more liberal Anglicans, while worshipers in Frederica said "We are protestants, but as to you, we cannot tell what religion you are of." But the effects of his discipline were not understood nor observed by those of his congregation from the disorderly classes of England. Wesley's enthusiasm shifted into utter frustration when once during a sermon he lifted his arms into the air and cried: "My poor friends, you are the scum of the earth!"

So it was that when his affair with Sophie Hopkey became public, the scandal was welcomed with open arms.

Sophie was one of his parishioners, a young woman with whom he fell in love. But it seems that he did not act fast enough to suit Sophie, as he could not decide whether to ask her to marry him. Sophie was the niece of Thomas Causton and resided with him at *Ocstead*. Being storekeeper, the Trustees' correspondent, their agent for issuing drafts, and their general agent in the colony, Thomas Causton had for at least three years enjoyed almost dictatorial powers in the province. Causton was known to be vain, overbearing, and one who threatened his opposition with corporal punishment. His judgment was biased by his friendships and hatreds.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, John Wesley was somewhat of an influence on Sophie. She chose her gowns to suit him, asked his advice on spiritual matters and even nursed him during an illness which lasted a week. Wesley was a frequent visitor to *Ocstead*. Causton did not particularly like

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The Life of John Wesley by C. T. Winchester

<sup>2</sup> Colonial Records of Georgia, Vol. IV, pp. 27, 33, 194

the young minister, but Sophie spent many hours with Wesley. After a time, she expected him to declare his intentions for marriage and when it did not happen, she was insulted.

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Wesley decided to discuss the matter with his close friend, Delamotte, who was well-educated and the son of a sugar baker in London who came to Georgia to serve without a salary. A small portion of his expenses were paid by the Trustees, while he donated his own money and time as a teacher. He was well loved, and when he left Georgia, a group of people accompanied him to the boat to bid him farewell. Delamotte was unhappy about the treatment afforded John Wesley, but left Georgia to return to London to join his father's business. Unfortunately, Delamotte advised Wesley to counsel with the trusted Moravian Elders.

Still weak from the effects of illness, Wesley visited the Elders who advised against marrying Sophie. When she learned of the decision, she was deeply hurt, resenting the interference, and decided to travel to Carolina for a diversion. It was in Charles Towne that she met William Williamson, a ne'er do-well who saw for himself a good future in marrying the niece of Thomas Causton. Williamson acted quickly and pressed his suit for marriage. After only 5 days, Sophie was married! Her husband decided that they should return to Savannah and live at *Ocstead*. The following Sunday, Sophie attended Christ Church Parish. Rev. John Wesley stood in the pulpit, clad in his white robes, passing sacrament. His eyes fell on Mrs. Williamson. When she reached for the bread, he withdrew the sacrament tray. She was humiliated. The town reeled in gossip as the embarrassing incident was related to her husband and uncle. Causton furiously demanded an apology from Wesley. In the meanwhile, Causton fell sick with fever and Wesley went properly to his plantation to attend him. On one of the sick visits, Wesley was surprised to find Sophie eager to engage him in conversation. She pulled him aside to ask why he had refused to pass her the Holy Communion. He explained to her that she had failed to post her notice of the intention to take Communion, which was his rule. "3 July 1737. Immediately after Holy Communion I mentioned to Mrs. Williamson (Mr. Causton's niece) some things which I thought reprobable in her behavior. At this she appeared extremely angry; said she did not expect such usage from me; and at the turn of the street through which we were walking home went abruptly away. The next day Mrs. Causton endeavored to excuse her; told me she was exceedingly grieved for what had passed the day before and desired me to tell her in writing what I disliked, which I accordingly did the day following."<sup>3</sup>

While Sophie told Wesley that she sincerely regretted her public display, the Causton's were insulted by his written comments and began a campaign to discredit him. Causton led a faction of the town against the minister, and was successful in gaining the support of the influential William Stephens. Revenge against Wesley manifested itself as public opinion went against him, and his flock stay home from church. His reputation was ruined.

Stephens favored Causton, as he took his side in all of Causton's sorted affairs during his administration as President of the colony. Causton entertained Stephens at his plantation, *Ocstead*, where the family dined with he and Mr. Anderson, and was, of course given Causton's views of a situation which had erupted between his niece and John Wesley. On Sunday, Stephens attended church and was surprised to see so thin an audience. The issue divided the town. After service, several Scotch gentlemen persuaded Stephens to have tea with them during which time they expressed their personal views against Thomas Causton who had persuaded Wesley to write the Trustees that they were idle and mischievous.

The following day Wesley told Stephens that Mrs. Williamson had been attending weekly lectures and then refused to go, probably at the behest of her husband, and this caused Wesley to refuse her the sacrament. In his journal, he wrote: "25 June 1737. Mr. Causton, the storekeeper and chief magistrate of Savannah, was seized with a slow fever. I attended him every day (as I did any of my parishioners who were in any painful or dangerous illness) and had a good hope, from the thankfulness he showed, that my labor was not in vain."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Journal of John Wesley

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Thomas Causton decided to have Wesley arrested for refusing his niece the sacrament and had Thomas Christie to issue the warrant. It was served by Constable Jones who carried Wesley into court to answer charges before Bailiff Parker and Mr. Christie. Wesley defended himself by saying that his giving or refusing to give the Lord's supper was an ecclesiastical matter and that he did not acknowledge the court's power to interrogate him. The magistrates decided not to retain Wesley in jail, but required him to make bail.

Mrs. Causton was not satisfied and challenged Wesley to answer her as to why he refused the sacrament to her niece. After a conversation with her, and upon her instructions, Wesley wrote a note to Sophie: "At Mr. Causton's request, I write at once. The rules where I proceed are these: - 'So many as intend to be partakers of the holy communion shall signify their names to the curate at least some time the day before.' This you did not do. And if any of these have done any wrong to his neighbor, by word or deed, so that the congregation be thereby offended, the curate shall advertise him that in any wise he presume not to come to the Lord's table on Sunday I will advertise you (as I have done more than once) wherein you have done wrong. And when you have openly declared yourself to have truly repented, I will administer to you the mysteries of God. August 11, 1737."<sup>5</sup>

Causton continued to maintain that he was the offended party, as Wesley had repelled Sophie from the holy communion purely out of revenge; because he had made proposals of marriage to her, which she rejected, and married instead Mr. Williamson. Sophie affirmed this concept in her own affidavit. Wesley was on the offensive, expressing himself in a sermon: "Sun. November 13. Mr. Wesley preached on these Words, Is it lawful to give Tribute unto Caesar or not? From whence he discoursed largely on the duties of Magistrates in their several subordinate Ranks and Degrees, and the Obedience due from the People."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid