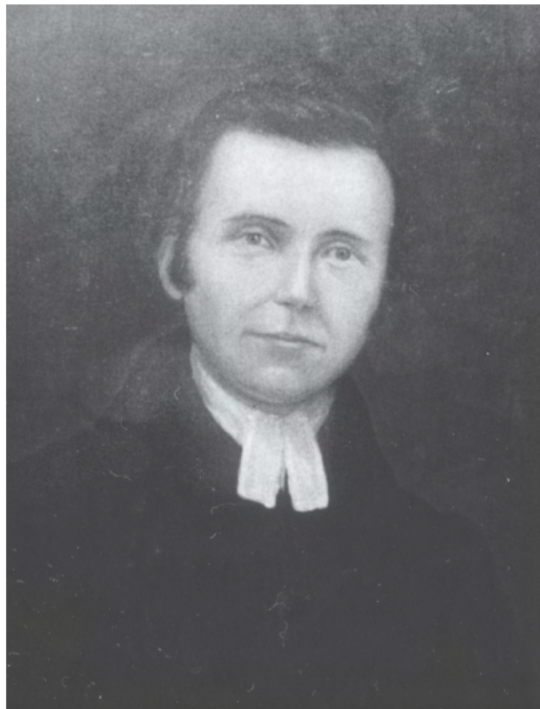


The John Street Methodist Church

BY SEAN MACCURTAIN

On John Street, in lower Manhattan less than two blocks east of Broadway, is the John Street Methodist Church. It stands on the site of the original Wesley Chapel erected by Limerick native, Philip Embury, in the 1768. The Wesley Chapel, described as “plain and decent,” was the first



house of worship for the Wesleyan community in New York, whose leaders included Embury and his first cousin, Barbara Heck, immigrants from Ballingrane, Rathkeale, County Limerick.

These Irish Methodists were descendants of German Palatines who had settled in West Limerick in 1704. Philip Embury had been a lay preacher in Ireland, licensed (circa 1756) by John Wesley. Embury, Heck, and several other Rathkeale Methodists sailed from Limerick to New York in 1760. Six years later, the two cousins organized the first Methodist meeting ever held in New York City. The meeting took place in Embury's home on October 12, 1776.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHAPEL AND THE CHURCH

Philip Embury was also a carpenter. In 1768 he built the Wesley Chapel on John Street on a piece of ground purchased from the widow of the third rector of Trinity Church. This church lot was the first Methodist-owned property in America. Embury's church was replaced in 1817 by a new house of worship. The second Methodist church was taken down in 1841, and on the same site the present-day Methodist church was erected.

This building was designated a New York City landmark in 1964, almost two centuries after the Limerickman built the Wesley Chapel. Today's John Street Methodist community is the oldest continuous Methodist congregation in America.

Since Embury was not an ordained minister, for baptisms his congregants took their children to Trinity Church or to St. Paul's Chapel. In these churches the Methodists also received communion. (The same was true of Irish Catholics before

Illustrations:

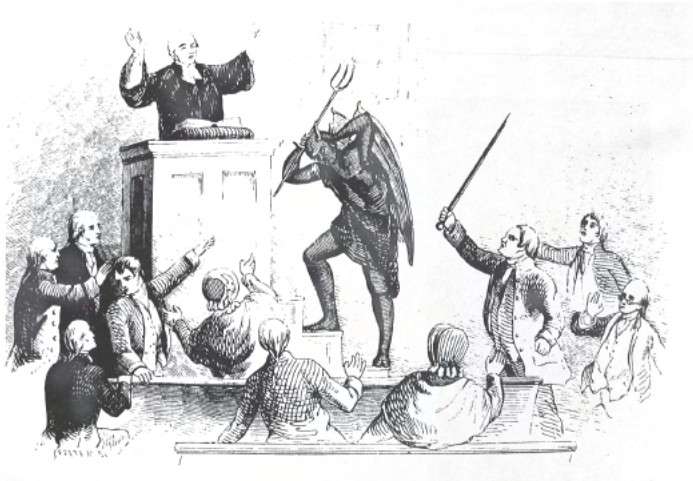
Left—Detail from portrait of Philip Embury. He lived from 1728–1773. After arriving from Ireland, he preached to the first Methodist meeting in New York in 1766.

Below—Barbara Heck as she was represented in a portrait done in 1932. She lived from 1734–1804. She emigrated with her cousin, Philip Embury, from Ballingrane, Rathkeale, County Limerick. Both courtesy of John Street Methodist Church.



Sean MacCurtain was raised in Mountcollins, County Limerick and came to the United States in 1958. He served four years in the Marine Corps, joined the New York City Transit Police in 1965, and received a B.Sc. degree (summa cum laude) in 1978. He taught Irish language and history at the Bronx Gaelic League for fifteen years. He is now retired and lives in Franklin, New York. He is a member of the Roundtable.

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Illustrations:
Above— Detail from a nineteenth-century depiction of British soldiers disrupting services at the church in December, 1777.

Below— Detail from painting of the original Wesley Chapel on John Street. From a painting by Joseph Beekman Smith completed in the nineteenth century. Both courtesy of John Street Methodist Church.

they had a church building of their own in lower Manhattan).

IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

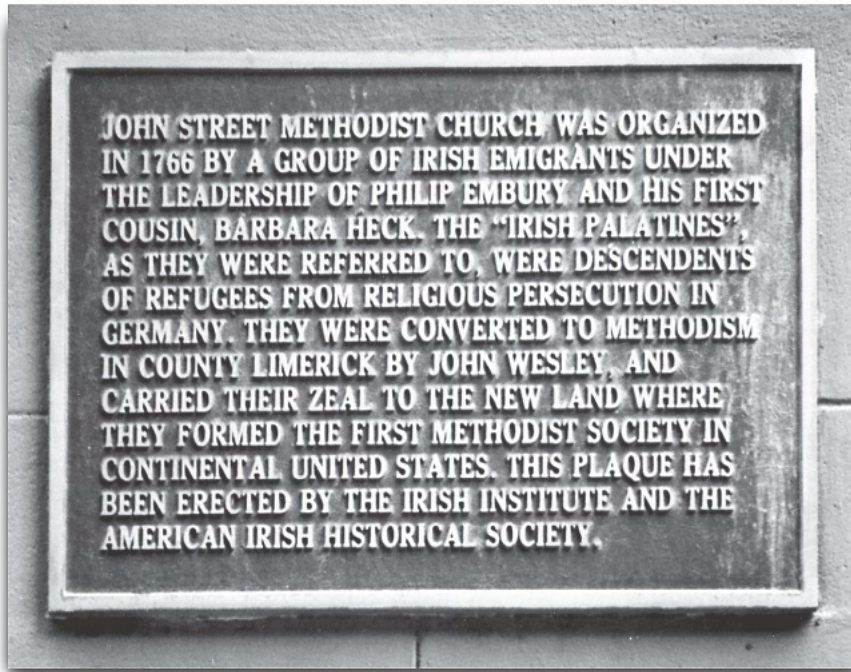
During the Revolutionary War the British assumed that the Methodists were loyal to King George III. However, some Methodists were in the Sons of Liberty. On January 18, 1770, more than two months before the Boston Massacre, the Sons of Liberty in New York confronted

British troops in a violent protest on Golden Hill, about one-hundred yards north of John Street. Several citizens injured at the Golden Hill protest received medical treatment in the John Street Methodist Church.

In 1777, Philip Embury's Church was actually a place of confrontation in the midst of religious services during the December holidays. A group of drunken British army officers, dressed in costumes as actors in a play, "The Devil to Pay in the West Indies," interrupted the services. A colonel in the role of the devil, with red horns and a long tail, approached the altar while his fellow actors vandalized the doors and windows. Following this ugly incident, British General Howe provided the Methodists with a military guard during religious services.

American Methodists, many of whom were former Anglicans, proclaimed their independence from the Anglican Church when the colonies became free of British control in 1783. In the 1840s southern Methodists separated from their northern brethren because of the slavery issue, but both branches reunited in





*Illustration:
Church plaque
erected by the Irish
Institute and the
American Irish
Historical Society
commemorates the
"Irish Palatines"
who were converted
to Methodism in
County Limerick
and who organized
the Wesley Chapel.
Courtesy of the
John Street
Methodist Church.*

1939. In 1968, the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren to form the United Methodist Church, some two hundred years after Philip Embury built the Wesley Chapel on John Street.

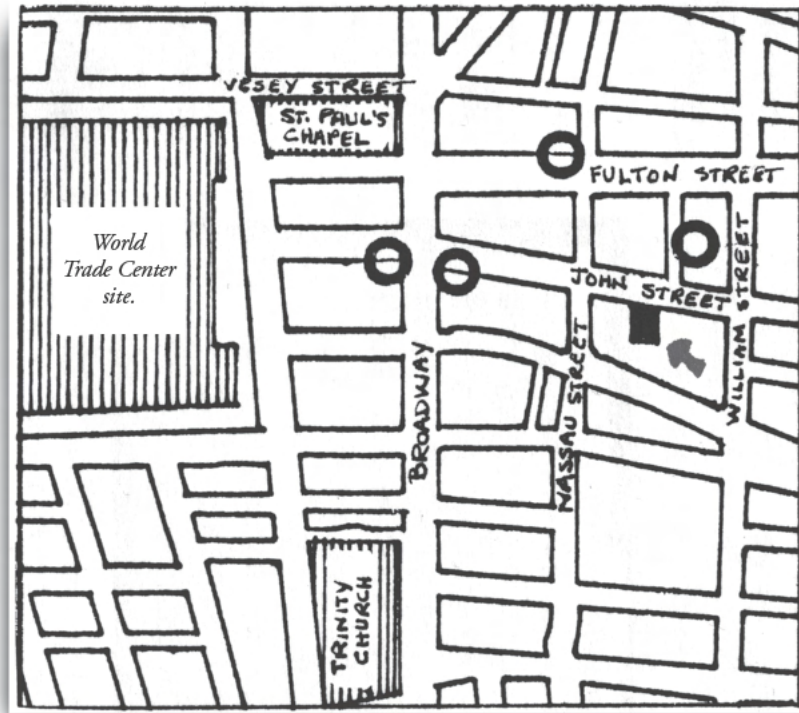
Today, the John Street Methodist Church

has a plaque on its front wall with an inscription stating that Philip Embury and Barbara Heck were "Irish Palatines" who had been converted to Methodism in County Limerick by John Wesley and that they formed the first Methodist Society in the United States. In the



*Illustrations:
Views of The John
Street Methodist
Church as it exists
today.*

Illustration:
 Location of the John
 Street Methodist Church.
 Circles indicate subway
 stops. Courtesy of Sandra
 Vivanco and the John
 Street Methodist Church.



basement of the church, a museum contains several artifacts of Methodist history. On display is a picture of the ship *Perry*, which brought Philip Embury, Barbara Heck, and other Limerick Methodists to New York in 1760. The ship is affectionately called the “Methodist Mayflower.” Philip Embury and Barbara Heck are known as the “Father and Mother of American Methodism.”

Ed. Note: *The John Street Methodist Church, and its downstairs museum, are at 44 John Street. Both are open to visitors on weekdays and Saturdays. For exact times, call 212-269-0014. Admission is free.*

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