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BENNETT MAXEY

Early M. E. Circuit-Rider -- A Witness To Powerful Revival

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INTRODUCTION

Bennett Maxey was an early Methodist Itinerant. Whether he was related closely to my branch of the Maxeys I am not sure, but it seems altogether possible, judging from what I have learned about the offspring of one Edward Maxey. If I have it right, he came to this country from Wales in 1764, and I think he and/or some of his family may have located in Virginia.

To date, little is recorded in our HDM Library about Bennett Maxey. John Lednum, in his M. E. History, states:

"In Spotsylvania, where Bishop Asbury expired, the Arnolds lived. And not far off, the Talleys and Tildens. In Fairfax, lived Mr. Fairfax, a descendant of Lord Fairfax, who gave name to the county; also, the Adams family, and Colonel Bell, and Captain Ward. In Alexandria, Brothers Busby, Shaw, and Hickman. There were Griffins, Clarks, Suttles, Parishes, Greens, Walters, Maxeys, Woodsons, Garretts, Meredys, Grangers, Lyons, Dickinsons, Collins, Rouses, Hundleys, Bauzees, Billups, Belamys, Daughlass, Stubbs, Shackelfords, Godfreys, Lasleys, Grymes, Roberts, Stockdales, Fretwells, and Mumpins, in Madison county."

Thus, it seems possible that Bennett Maxey was a part of the Maxey family in Fairfax County, Virginia during the 1700s. Lednum also later quotes a portion from the Sketch of Philip Gatch (2nd American-born Circuit Rider):

"A great revival took place in Powhatan county, Va. It commenced with the children of Methodist parents ... It spread generally over the state of Virginia, and into Carolina. Six young men, the fruits of this revival in our neighborhood, became preachers; five of them, namely, D.

Asbury, Chastain, Pope, Maxey, and Locket, became traveling preachers." -- "Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch," pp. 86 to 89.

It seems possible from the above that after being saved in the great revival in Powhatan County Virginia, Bennett Maxey was one of the 5 young Virginians named by Gatch as having joined the itinerant ranks (perhaps the 6th mentioned was Gatch himself)

In my work of digitizing and proofing a number of early Methodist works, I have repeatedly come across accounts of a great revival that took place just prior to the Revolutionary War -- a revival that included parts of Virginia. It may be this very revival that Philip Gatch mentioned above. God was moving in power upon the hearts of these Virginians before the Revolutionary War struck. Numbers were both saved and sanctified wholly. It was Holy Ghost revival preceding Hell-sent Revolutionary chaos. No, I do not brand the American Patriots as Hell-sent, but the chaos resulting from the conflicts in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 were hard on the Church, hard on the cause of God.

So, Bennett Maxey, may have been among the many who were saved and sanctified in that great Pre-Revolutionary War Revival. I wonder? What far reaching impact did that Holy Ghost revival in early America have upon succeeding generations of Maxeys? -- and perhaps your family as well? Another thing I have noticed in reading so much early Methodist history: Numbers of family-names among the early Methodists, are family-names still found in various parts of the holiness movement today. Selah.

Back to Bennett Maxey:-- Jesse Lee, (in hdm0118) the first American Methodist historian, lists Bennet Maxey (spelled with one "t") as having been admitted to the Methodist traveling ministry in 1788, and located in 1797. However, Nathan Bangs, in his later M. E. History (hdm0012), states that Bennett Maxey was received into the Methodist Itinerant Ministry in 1788 and located in 1835. Location, however, did not necessarily mean retirement from the ministry. It did mean leaving the traveling ministry, but many times when a Circuit-rider stopped itinerating he was still very active, preaching in his immediate locality and sometimes in a large region around his home.

In his book, "Sketches of Western Methodism," hdm0230, James B. Finley relates an interesting story in which Bennet (also with one "t") Maxey was involved. Which spelling of his first name was correct, I know not, nor am I certain which historian had his date of location right, but these things matter not. However, Finley's story below reveals how two pioneer women wrestled in prayer until God sent a powerful revival -- one of which Bennett Maxey was a happy witness and in which he helped fan the holy flame.

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ABOUT BENNETT MAXEY FROM "SKETCHES OF WESTERN METHODISM"

Chapter 44 -- Pioneer Women

Historians may write of the brave and patriotic women of ancient times, of the mother of the Gracchi, and the mother of Napoleon, and Washington, and the more recent patriotic deeds of our Revolutionary mothers, who freely gave up their sons to fight the battles of liberty, and sacrificed every thing but their more than Roman virtue, in supporting our heroic fathers in the conflict for freedom; be it our pleasing task to record some of the achievements of our pioneer mothers in the west, whose zeal, and courage, and self-sacrificing devotion, afford specimens of a moral sublimity greater than was ever witnessed in the heroism of the patriot mothers of olden time.

When the Rev. Bennet Maxey traveled as a missionary in Georgia, about the close of the Revolutionary war, the following incident occurred, which he related to me with his own lips. It will be recollected that nearly all that country was a wilderness, inhabited by savage Indians. There were but few Methodist societies, and they were widely separated. The missionary, in his long and perilous journeys, could only reach them occasionally, and in doing so would have to encounter almost as much toil and hardship as the emigrant now does in crossing the plains to California. Even then, with all his zeal and perseverance, there were some settlements that could not be reached without a reinforcement of missionary laborers.

In one of these settlements, six miles distant from each other, there lived two pious women, who had emigrated to the country from the state of Maryland, where they had been converted and joined the Methodist Church. They felt the loss of the ministrations of the Gospel. No Sabbath brought with it its holy scenes and sanctuary privileges. The time of the people seemed to be occupied, on Sabbaths, in the sports of the chase, or in idle and frivolous amusements. While, however, the neighbors were engaged in the desecration of the holy Sabbath, these two pious women agreed to meet half way between their respective cabins, and hold a prayer and class meeting by themselves.

Sabbath after Sabbath these devoted females walked to their appointment in the woods, and there, in the depths of that southern forest, with no eye to see but God, they spoke to one another about their trials, and conflicts, and hopes, and "the Lord hearkened and heard, and a book of remembrances was written before him." The voice of praise and prayer echoed through the wildwood. They not only prayed for themselves and their neighbors, but they besought the Lord that he would send the Gospel into that wild and destitute region. One Sabbath, while thus engaged in religious exercises, they were overheard by a hunter, who came unconsciously upon their retreat; and there, in the language of the poet, in that

"Scene where spirits blend,
And friend holds fellowship with friend,"

around that common mercy-seat, they united their supplications. It was holy ground, and a sacred awe came over him, as from the covert of a tree he listened to their praises and their prayers.

This hunter's cabin was not far distant from the place of meeting, and every Sabbath he would, at the appointed time, take his station and listen to the soul-thrilling eloquence of their prayers and songs. He had not, though a roving hunter, been reared altogether without the influences of religion. His pious mother, long since in heaven, had taught him the fear of the Lord,

and her instructions and prayers would cross his memory in his wild, erratic course, and like the recurrence of a pleasant dream awaken hallowed memories. On a certain Sabbath he resolved to introduce himself to the strange, mysterious worshipers; and, accordingly, after they had concluded their meeting, and were taking leave of each other to return to their homes, he appeared before them, and in tones of kindness invited them to meet at his cabin on the next Sabbath, and he would collect his neighbors.

Here was a trial which they had not anticipated. But they regarded it as an interposition of divine Providence in their behalf; and though it would be a heavy cross, requiring the greatest amount of moral courage and endurance, to meet the rough and sturdy backwoodsmen, and hold a meeting in their midst, they must not deny their Master in refusing to enter this open door. It was, accordingly, noised abroad that two women were going to hold meeting at the hunter's house; and as the thing was entirely new, the whole neighborhood went. The husbands of the two pious and devoted women, not knowing it was their wives, but being filled with curiosity at the singular announcement, were among the number of those who took their companions with them to the place of meeting.

Their astonishment can better be imagined than described, when they saw them take their places in the cabin as the women that were to hold meeting on the occasion. One of them read a chapter in the Bible, which she did in a clear, strong voice, and then gave out a hymn, which was sung by the two and the congregation to some familiar tune; after which they kneeled down, and the one who had read the Bible offered up a most fervent and deeply-impressive prayer to God, in behalf of the congregation assembled.

After prayer was over they united in singing one of those songs of Zion, with which they had made the woods ring at their Sabbath meetings previous. Many a heart was touched, as the divine strains rolled over the wondering assembly, and the tear stole down many a rough, sun-burnt face. When this was ended, the other rose tremblingly but firmly, as with the heart of a giant, and commenced telling the plain, simple story of her conversion. As she spoke, her voice assumed a majesty and a power truly wonderful. God sent down his Spirit and attended it with power to the hearts of the audience; and first the hunter, and then the two husbands, unable any longer to repress their feelings, broke out in loud cries for mercy. Several, while she was speaking, fell, as if smitten with lightning, to the floor, others fled from the house in the greatest consternation.

These pious sisters in the Lord were not frightened by this exhibition of divine power; for although it was farthest from their anticipations, yet they had been familiar with such scenes in the days of their youth. They knew "it was the Lord's doings, and it was marvelous in their eyes," and they, therefore, commenced singing and praying with the slain of the Lord. It was not long till several were happily and powerfully converted to God, and this increased the power; and they were set immediately to work to pray for penitents and sinners. The work spread, mighty consternation fell upon all the people, and far and near, those who had not attended at the beginning flocked to the place of prayer.

The hunter and his wife, and the two husbands were all converted, and the meeting continued with but little intermission, night and day, for two weeks. It was what might properly

and most significantly be denominated a protracted meeting. The news of the wonderful work flew as on the wings of the wind, to the distance of forty or fifty miles, when it reached the ears of brother Maxey, who immediately started for the scene.

When he arrived, he found the two faithful female heralds of the cross still on the ground, fighting most manfully the battle of the Lord. They had already received forty new recruits, all converted and happy in the love of God, and they were all living, speaking witnesses for Jesus -- not a still-born child in all their ranks. Scarcely had the itinerant reached the scene of action, than, like the old soldier, at the sound of battle, the power of God came on him, and he entered the ranks of God's army with a shout of victory and triumph. They at once recognized his spirit, and hailed him as a fellow-soldier; but how great was their rejoicing when they found him to be one of Immanuel's officers, in the great army of God. To him the sisters cheerfully intrusted the leadership, and he led them forth valiantly to glorious war. With a voice like a trumpet, and a love for God and zeal for souls which was like fire in his bones, he went from neighborhood to neighborhood proclaiming salvation, and the work spread and prevailed, so that before the revival ceased, it had covered a sufficient extent of country to form a good large circuit, in the entire bounds of which there never had been preaching before.

And now, dear reader, what a field for reflection is here! -- a wonderful manifestation of the power of God, through the agency of two pious, heroic, Christian women. How many would have said, could they have witnessed these two devoted females, commencing their religious exercises at that meeting, where were crowds of ungodly men, collected from all parts of the country, and impelled by mere curiosity at the novelty of the thing, "how improper! how unlike the decency and order which the apostle Paul enjoins should be observed in religious worship! And then, how shocking to delicacy, for women to speak in public, especially in such a mixed assembly!" But we see in this, as in other similar manifestation, that God's ways are not as our ways; and that he who has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, and things that are naught to bring to naught things that are, that no flesh might glory in his presence, the excellency of the power being of God and not of man, selected those two females as the chosen instruments of his Holy Spirit, to bear the messages of mercy and salvation to that dark and destitute region. We are obliged to concede this, or to admit what is abhorrent to every Christian; namely, that the Holy Spirit will sanction and set its seal to a work brought about by improper agencies.

Again what Christian, who even believed that it was right and proper, and perfectly in accordance with that "decency and order" recommended by the apostle, for women to exercise their gifts in singing, and prayer, and Christian conversation or exhortation, would have had faith to believe that any good would have resulted from such a meeting? Yet these Christian females had faith, and according to that faith so it was to them. Besides, the circumstances were such as to justify such a procedure. In their neighborhood there were no ministers of the Gospel, and no Sabbath and sanctuary privileges; and impressed by the Spirit to pray the Lord of the harvest that he would send forth laborers, they went to prayer, and God heard and answered in a way that they had not anticipated, and that human reason could not have divined.

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