

# THE CONNECTION

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## Bishop William Capers

*Part 2 of a 4-part Series on WSUMC History of Justice Issues*

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When this horrid pandemic has run its course and life tends back toward normalcy, those worshiping at Washington Street Church will again enjoy furnishings and fellowship and music and sacraments once taken for granted. But it's doubtful that these congregants will walk through the narthex—after a long absence—without having a renewed appreciation for the elegant tablet over the sideboard in tribute to Bishop William Capers. Always capturing attention, this memorial was installed in 1907 and has for years paid homage to a true giant of 19th century Methodism in South Carolina and throughout the young nation.

Rev. Dr. Capers served Washington Street Methodist Church on four occasions: in 1818, 1831, 1835, and 1845. During these early 19th century years, an itinerant minister could expect only a one- to two-year church appointment; the frequency of reassignment was customary and had little to do with job performance. Early on Capers established himself as an effective minister. His parishioners were complimentary of this preacher's mild demeanor, intelligence, and ministerial presence. He had a "fine" face and a mind that was "well-balanced, practical, and solid" (Wightman, pp. 492-93). He possessed an excellent singing voice, an apt quality for a Methodist preacher, and often infused Christ's parables into his inspirational sermons.

Rev. Dr. Capers' career in Christian service extended beyond his performance in the pulpit. For example, in 1831, demonstrating his obvious grasp of church needs and long-term planning, Capers led Washington Street Church's decision to build a new structure and assisted in the laying of the cornerstone for the new building. And in 1837 Capers was elected editor of the *Southern Christian Advocate* in its first year of publication. Because of the comprehensive and effective nature of Capers' life in service to Christ and to his many parishioners, he was consecrated bishop in the Washington Street Church of Petersburg, Virginia, in May of 1846.

"The righteous  
shall be in everlasting remembrance."

IN MEMORIAM

This stone

is erected in grateful memory of  
**WILLIAM CAPERS, D. D.**

One of the first Bishops of  
The Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Born in St. Thomas's Parish, S. C.,

26th January, 1790

Died at his home in Anderson District, S. C.,

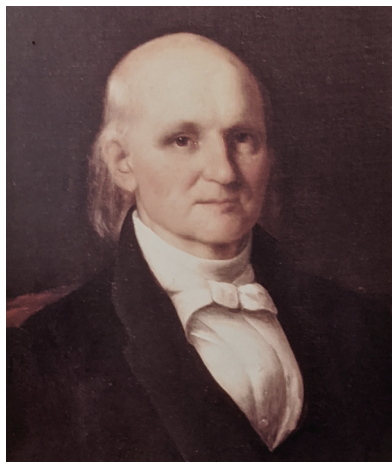
29th January, 1855

after a devoted ministry of forty-six years.

He was the founder of missions to the  
Slaves on Southern plantations.

To shining abilities and the grace of eloquent  
speech He united Godly learning, with great  
simplicity and purity of character which  
endeared him to his brethren and won for  
him universal esteem from his countrymen.

1907.



This overview of the life of Bishop Capers intends to bring sharp focus to this spiritual leader's involvement in the theme of racial justice. His involvement began in 1821 when Capers was selected to lead the mission to the Creek Indians in Georgia and Alabama.

This ministry lasted until 1824, when the removal of the Creeks beyond the Mississippi River was begun in earnest. Even so, the missionary work with minority populations continued through Capers' work with slaves in South Carolina and in other southern states. In 1829 a prominent lowcountry plantation owner, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, approached Capers regarding the assignment of a missionary to the slaves on Pinckney's plantation. By this time Capers was president of the Annual Conference Missionary Society. Following similar requests from other plantation owners, Capers supported the establishment of a permanent slave mission. In 1840 Capers became secretary of the Southern Department of Missionary Work for the general church, and his program moved beyond South Carolina, spreading eventually from Virginia to Texas. By 1844, there were 54 missionaries serving 59 missions with a membership of 18,182.

Many would consider the outstanding missionary

work of Bishop Capers, however, to be somewhat dampened by his views on slavery. Capers' parents were slaveholders, and the bishop himself once owned slaves. A most telling comment about slavery came from Capers in the *Southern Christian Advocate* in March of 1838: "Where it [slavery] may exist as an element of the constitution of the country, an institution granted by the laws—is not a moral evil." He later more avidly said, "We denounce the principles and opinions of the abolitionists in toto. . . We consider and believe that the Holy Scriptures . . . do unequivocally authorize the relation of master and slave" (Wightman, pp. 295-96). Nevertheless, Bishop Capers was a staunch advocate of efforts to evangelize the slaves, bring them to Christianity, and make their yoke of domination a lighter one.

On January 25, 1855, Bishop Capers died in Anderson. His body was brought to Columbia for burial in the Washington Street churchyard. His grave is said to reside today beneath the chancel in the pulpit area. While demonstrating a typical view on racial justice for his time, Bishop Capers contributed strongly to Washington Street Church and to his beloved Methodism.

#### Sources

Huff, A.V., Jr., *Tried by Fire*. Columbia, South Carolina: The R.L. Bryan Company, 1975.

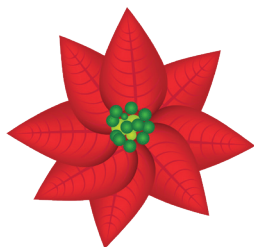
Wightman, William M., *Life of William Capers, D.D., One of the Bishops of the Methodist*

*Episcopal Church, South*. Rpt. Nashville, Tennessee: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1902.

## Poinsettias

This year, we will be ordering 25 poinsettias to use with our virtual and outside services. If you would like to order a plant/s, please download and complete the form that can be found online at [wsmethodist.org/connect/forms-and-policies](http://wsmethodist.org/connect/forms-and-policies). Plants will be available for pick up after the Outdoor Worship Service on December 20th. The deadline for placing your order is November 16th, and the cost is \$25 per plant. We will announce when we have reached the 25 and will no longer be accepting orders.

Thank you for your support and patience as we try to preserve our Advent traditions in these challenging times.



Nov. 8 will be  
Nan Self's 108th Birthday!  
Please consider sending her a  
card to help her celebrate  
her day!



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