

John Harper and the Founding of Washington Street Methodist Church

Part I of a 4-part Series on WSUMC History

by Mike Broome, Church Historian

As Washington Street's Racial Justice Action Team documents the church's racial history, it is appropriate that emphasis be given to the church's founding and to the Harper family. After all, the genesis of Washington Street Church was tied closely to an unfortunate issue of anti-abolitionist zeal and threatened violence.

John Harper was admitted to the Methodist Conference in Great Britain in 1786 and, after stops in such locations as Ireland, the West Indies, Massachusetts, and North Carolina, found himself and his young family in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1799. Interestingly, the American Methodist Church did not accept Harper's British ordination, conducted by John Wesley himself, so Harper was "re-ordained" in America in 1796. (Goodness! Did our Methodist forebears hold such a grudge against the British that not even Wesley's blessing was enough credential?)

According to Dr. Huff in *Tried by Fire*, the definitive history of WSUMC, early during Harper's assignment in Charleston, he was sent copies of an address opposing slavery from the Methodist Book Concern in Philadelphia. This "abolitionist propaganda" was later reputed to have been distributed by Reverend Harper, and he was threatened by adherents of slavery. At the time, of course, Charleston was one of the South's principal centers of the slave trade and its city leadership strong advocates of enforced servitude of blacks. Needing little else in the way of motivation, Harper left the itinerant ministry, left Charleston, and, in December of 1801, bought two tracts of land in Columbia. Following Harper's meeting with a small group of Methodists in December of 1803, the decision was made to establish a church. Harper offered the group his two parcels of land at the corner of Washington and Marion streets, and a rustic wooden building was completed in 1804. This building was the first Christian house of worship in Columbia.

Never a formally stationed minister at Washington Street Church, Reverend Harper along with his family moved to Mount Bethel Academy near Newberry, South Carolina, in 1805. He died there in 1815 and is buried in the school's cemetery in a grave marked by a simple fieldstone. In 1987 WSUMC erected at Mount Bethel Cemetery a handsome monument in Harper's memory.

The Harper family story would not be complete without mention of William Harper, Reverend Harper's



oldest son who was born in the West Indies in 1790. William graduated from Mount Bethel Academy and became the first student to enroll at the new South Carolina College in 1805. He graduated three years later and, during an honored career, became a prominent lawyer, member of the U.S. Senate, and jurist. Unlike his father, William was a strong defender of slavery and the states' rights and nullification stances of John C. Calhoun. He believed strongly that slavery was a social good and was proud to quote from an essay by Professor Thomas Dew:

Slavery has done more to elevate a degraded race in the scale of humanity; to tame the savage; to civilize the barbarous; to soften the ferocious; to enlighten the ignorant; and to spread the blessings of Christianity among the heathen than all the missionaries that philanthropy and religion have ever sent forth. (Dew, p. 60)

It is indeed ironic in the history of Washington Street Church that its founder, John Harper, obviously an

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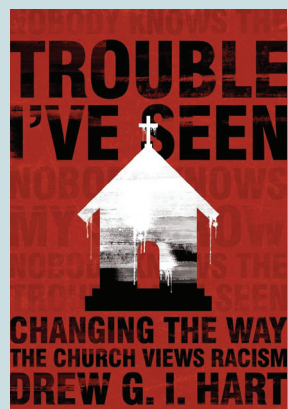
opponent of slavery, was the father of William Harper, one of the South's most ardent proponents of the "peculiar institution." Historians such as Bruce Catton, James McPherson, Shelby Foote, and Michael Shaara have spoken about the horrible rending of families before, during, and after the Civil War as resolution was sought for the long-standing conundrum of racial justice. The Harper family appeared to embody this conflict. Perhaps, in commitment and openness, faith communities such

as Washington Street Church with its Racial Justice Team can lead a better way toward true racial harmony.

Main Sources:

Harper, William, et al. *The Pro-Slavery Argument*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853. (Professor Thomas Dew was a contributor to this collection.)

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



Small Group Study Starts Tonight!

Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism by Drew Hart will take starts October 22 on **Thursdays** from 7:00-8:00 pm starting

October 22 and runs through October 19. In this book, Hart offers concrete practices for churches that seek solidarity with the oppressed and are committed to racial justice. Discussions will occur via Zoom and will run from 7:00 – 8:00 pm. For more information and to sign up, please email Rev. Alston at aflippert@umcsc.

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*All Saints Sunday
Orders due Oct. 26*

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Nancy Epting	Angela Powers
Linda Fesperman	Rick Rowe
Don Fowler	Nan Self
Charles Garren	Barbara Ann Walker
Frances Grimes	Our homebound
Dottie Hanlin	
Bud Harrelson	
Karen Horne	

Longtime UMC Missionary Passes

Edith Long Schisler and her husband, Rev. William Richard Schisler Jr. (deceased), were United Methodist Missionaries in Brazil for over 45 years. Her grandfather was one of the first Methodist Missionaries to begin work there in 1886. WSUMC helped support the work of the Schislars in Brazil for many years through the Easter offering, which was doubled by the Missions Committee, and then sent to three missionary couples: the Schislars, the Ways (also in Brazil) and a couple in Mexico. These generous offerings were so much appreciated as they helped build the Living Home for the Aging (Centro Vivencial para Pessoas Idosas/CVPI) in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil, the pride and joy of the Schislars, and every resident that has lived there.

Throughout their many visits to Columbia, WSUMC became their home church because their daughter, Susanna Schisler Melo is a member of Washington Street. Edith made many friends, particularly among the United Methodist Women, the Dawsey Class and the Grace Class. Her ability to love and laugh, her wisdom, intelligence, and curiosity, her kindness and unselfishness, her inner spirit and beauty, her dignity and sense of humor, her resilience and her faith, made her so endearing to everyone who knew her or met her. She was very fond of everyone she met at Washington Street and was a beloved servant of God among our church family. Let us continue to remember Susanna and her family in our prayers as they remember Edith with thanksgiving.