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EARLY SETTLEMENT AND RELIGIOUS GROWTH IN THE FREEDOM DISTRICT OF CARROLL COUNTY

BY DIANA SCOTT

Recently, at a Visitation Day program at the Holy Trinity Cemetery in Eldersburg, I had the opportunity to portray Mary Welsh, a character from South Carroll's past. She was the niece of John Welsh, who donated land for the first colonial church in the area. In preparing for the event, I became interested in the early religious life of the Freedom District. When were the first churches built? Who built them? How far did people have to travel to get to church? How long did these churches survive? This paper is an attempt to tell a story of the settlement patterns and the earliest churches in the area that became the Freedom District of Carroll County.



RELIGIOUS BEGINNINGS

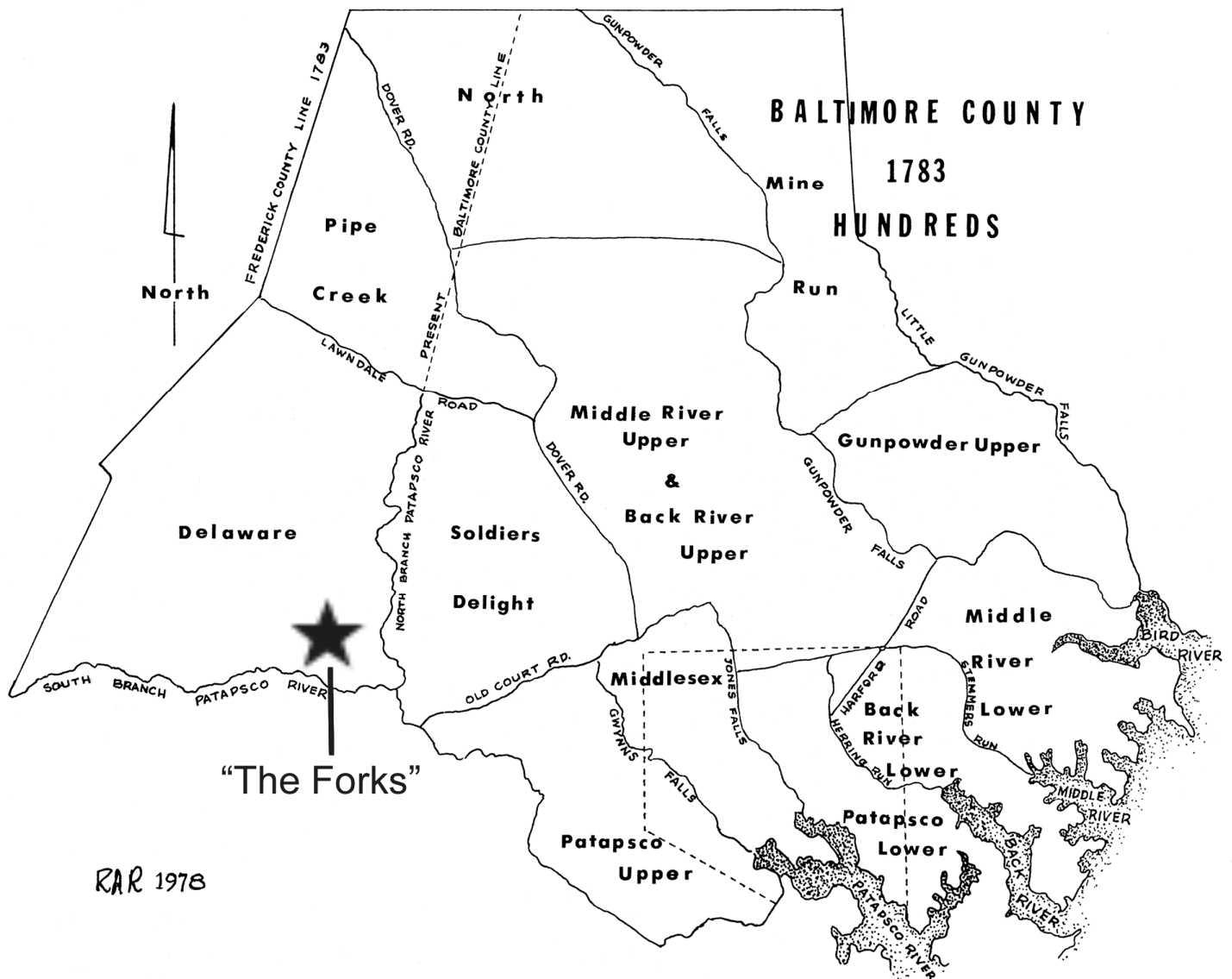
As many of us learned in school, George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, founded Maryland as a refuge for Roman Catholics who had not been treated

kindly in England since Henry VIII established the Church of England in 1534. A century later, however, Calvert had earned the respect of King Charles I, who granted him the right to settle a colony in America. To attract people to his newly acquired land, Calvert and his son Cecil, the second Lord Baltimore, permitted anyone who sailed to Maryland to worship as he pleased. Indeed, during the early years after 1634 in St. Mary's City, the capital, Catholics and Protestants worshiped peaceably in the same chapel.

Once the Protestant king and queen, William and Mary, wrested power from the Baltimores in 1691, Maryland became a royal colony with only one established religion—the Church of England. Over time, the Maryland legislature passed laws that restricted the freedom of Catholics by forbidding them to worship in their own churches and excluding them from political office. As a result, when settlers built the first churches in that part of Baltimore County that would later become Carroll County's Freedom District, those churches were Protestant.



Solidly built with two-foot-thick stone walls and a fireproof roof, Fort Garrison still stands. Photo by Diana Scott.



Baltimore County Hundreds, 1783. From *A History of Baltimore County* by Neal Brooks. Used with permission.

GROWTH OF WESTERN BALTIMORE COUNTY

As settlers moved into the hinterlands of western Baltimore County, they encroached upon Indian hunting grounds and had reason to fear attack. To calm their worries, Fort Garrison was built in 1695, and a troop of mounted rangers in the king's service began patrolling the Indian paths from the Patapsco River to the Susquehanna. At this time, the fort was nine miles from the nearest white inhabitants. However, within a half century, enough people had settled nearby to warrant the formation of a "hundred," a political subdivision designated for its capacity to raise a hundred militiamen in time of war. This new Soldiers Delight Hundred stretched

from Rolling Road in present-day Randallstown to the Frederick County line, along Parr's Ridge (roughly today's Route 27).

Physical security was not sufficient for these early settlers. They wanted spiritual guidance as well. High Sheriff John Risteau interceded on their behalf with St. Paul's Anglican Church, the mother church in Baltimore, to build a chapel of ease to be known as St. Thomas's Parish or the Garrison Church, which still exists today in Owings Mills. By 1755 the number of wilderness inhabitants had increased to the point of requiring a new hundred to be carved out of Soldiers Delight. Called Delaware Hundred after the Delaware Indians, it encompassed the land



Welsh's Tavern, a local inn and gathering place in the 18th century, was owned by John Welsh. It was demolished around 1990. Courtesy of the Sykesville Gate House Museum.

between the north branch of the Patapsco River and the Frederick County line. The waterways, fertile land, and Indian trails crisscrossing the area between the north and south branches of the Patapsco River were good reasons for settlers to choose this area. The English, Welsh, and Scotch-Irish people who first settled this land emigrated from St. Mary's, Anne Arundel, and other counties on the western shore of the Chesapeake, while still others were moving in from nearby Soldiers Delight Hundred. They called the area "The Forks."

One of the first to take advantage of the Indian trails crisscrossing the area was John Digges, a socially elite entrepreneur related to the Calverts on his mother's side and to the governor of Virginia on his father's. His idea was to widen an eighteen-inch Indian trail so that wagons, horses, oxen, and men could use it to haul ore from a mine he owned near Hance Steelman's Trading Post in present-day Linwood, between New Windsor and Union Bridge, to Baltimore. This work took place as early as 1749. Digges hired his son Dudley to oversee road construction from the mine to a warehouse located in present-day Eldersburg. The completed road was

first known as the Great Road, then Soldiers Delight Rolling Road, Digges Wagon Road, Liberty Road, Liberty Turnpike, and finally back to Liberty Road.

The first person to own land in the Freedom area was Benjamin Belt, who patented *Belt's Hills* in 1720. Some of the neighboring owners were John Rowles (400-acre *Eagles Nest*, 1724), Richard Owings (*Owings Outland Plains*, 1724), Henry Sewell (*Saplin Ridge*, 1731), Philip Hammond (*Hammond's Fine Soil Forrest*, 1731), Robert Tevis (*Tevis' Chance*, 1754), Robert Gilcresh (*The Escape*, 1757), John Welsh (*Arabia Petria Enlarged*, 1762), Thomas Bennett (*Bennetts' Park*, 1763), Edward Heweth (*Sandy Bottom*, 1763), and John Baseman (1,399-acre *Baseman's Discovery Corrected*, 1765).

One of these early settlers, John Welsh, opened a fortified tavern on the Great Road, a block house with port holes in the outer walls. Although no record of any Indian attack exists, it is apparent that the community was prepared. In the early and mid 20th century, farmers found many Indian artifacts near the northeast corner of the Liberty and Sykesville roads, lending credence to Mr. Welsh's story.

John Elder, an early settler, laid out a town near Welsh's Tavern before 1800. It later became known as Eldersburg in his honor. The town's location at the midway point between Frederick and Baltimore made it an ideal site for men and horses to rest a few hours, have a meal, or spend the night, before continuing their journey to the Baltimore markets. Drove of sheep, cattle, and turkeys were sent down Liberty Road with such regularity that other men built inns and taverns to take advantage of this lucrative traffic.

With the population growing in Eldersburg, John Welsh, John Elder, Abel Brown, Edward Dorsey, and Robert Tevis asked permission from St. Paul's Church to build an Anglican chapel of ease closer to their homes in Delaware Hundred on two acres donated by Welsh. They laid the cornerstone on March 8, 1771, and by 1773 the chapel was complete. St. Thomas's vestry, composed of Thomas Owings, William Randall, John Elder, Christopher Randall, and Nicholas Dorsey, Jr., allowed 50 pounds for seats to be placed into the chapel on the "Forks of the Falls" and the next year ordered a prayer book for the "chapel near Mr. Welch's." [Allen, p. 32] This would be the last colonial chapel built in present-day Carroll County. Remarkably, much of its graveyard still exists today, behind the Princess Shopping Center in Eldersburg.

METHODISTS AND BAPTISTS AFTER THE REVOLUTION

The Revolutionary War was responsible for the rather quick decline of this new chapel. Anglican clergy throughout the colonies scurried back to England, fearing accusations of loyalty to the crown and the church rather than to the new nation. And because white males and male servants over age 16 no longer had to pay 40 pounds of tobacco to the county sheriff for the ministers' wages, they could no longer enjoy the leisure to which they had become accustomed. Even in England, the clergy's life style was often so indiscreet that John Wesley revolted and formed a new religious society whose members would model their lives on Christ's. Their opponents derisively called them "Methodists" because they were so methodical in their attempts to do so.

Before the war most Methodists were Anglicans and their ministers were lay preachers or readers who could not baptize or give communion without being ordained. (Evangelist Robert Strawbridge received criticism for ignoring this prohibition.) The preachers and parishioners did not intend to separate from the mother church. However, by 1784 the contempt they had suffered proved too much. They broke away at the Christmas Conference held that year at Lovely Lane in Baltimore and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of

America. This revolt was a serious blow to the Protestant Episcopal Church of America, and the rectors of St. Paul and St. Thomas Parishes met with Francis Asbury and Dr. Thomas Coke to bring about a reunion of the churches, to no avail.

The residents of the Delaware Hundred were ideally placed for this new Methodist enthusiasm to wash over them. To the south Francis Asbury, who became the first superintendent (bishop) of the entire Methodist movement in America, was visiting converted parishioners such as Robert Owings (of Owings Mills and Owings Outland Plains). In the north, the popular and zealous Irishman Robert Strawbridge was at work. Strawbridge moved from near New Windsor to Baltimore in 1776, while Asbury is thought to have given his farewell sermon at the Fork Chapel in 1815.

Little has been written about the Baptists who settled the Freedom area. In 1806 St. Thomas's vestry agreed to hand over the keys to the chapel in The Forks to both the Baptists and the Methodists for their religious services. Freedom Baptists began to use the chapel on September 29 of that year. Perhaps their continued use of the chapel convinced the St. Thomas vestry to agree to refurbish the chapel. They held a lottery and used the proceeds to give the exterior a coat of "roughcast" (stucco) in 1808. Apparently, some time in the following years they used the chapel as a school. Despite the improvements, neither the Baptists nor the Methodists used the chapel very much and it began to fall into disrepair.

Eventually the Baptists became well off enough to build a meeting house, which they appropriately named Patapsco after the nearest river. They used that church for religious services until the first few years of the 20th century but then converted it into a dwelling. The Baptist meeting house still stands today as a private residence on a hillside south of Old Liberty Road near Sunset Drive.

REVITALIZATION OF THE CHAPEL OF EASE

By the 1840s the chapel of ease in The Forks had fallen into a disgraceful condition—"the doors and windows and roof were gone and the floor had been

torn up to facilitate the taking of the rabbits which concealed themselves under it.” [Allen, p. 85] A farmer was using it for a haphazard shelter for his horses and cattle. The work for repairing it came to \$200. Most likely George Frazier Warfield and his wife Rebecca, who are credited with a successful movement to restore the old place, paid the bill. On October 31, 1843, Bishop Whittingham consecrated “this ancient House of God as the Church of the Holy Trinity.” [Purman, p. 16]

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church’s first vestry was composed of George Frazier Warfield, William W. Warfield, Warner W. Warfield of “Bagdad Farm,” Jesse Hollingsworth, James Sykes, John Calhoun, Nicholas Dorsey, and George W. Manro (or Monroe). Rev. David Hillhouse Buell was appointed its half-time rector with the other half of his time devoted to missionary work in Westminster (the outcome of which was the Parish of the Ascension in 1844). The Warfields, while trying to reestablish the Trinity Parish, were also involved in erecting St. Barnabas, another chapel of ease, for those working at James Sykes’s cotton factory in the town of Sykesville. Eventually, St. Barnabas became the

predominant parish. The last service held at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church took place in 1923. The church was bulldozed and buried about 20 years later. Perhaps this is the fate of Mary Welsh’s grave—mixed with the rubble of the ancient chapel.

METHODISTS AND EPISCOPALIANS IN THE FORKS

Itinerant preachers were the rule in Methodism. Francis Asbury traveled 270,000 miles and preached 16,000 sermons during his career. Ministers trying to emulate the founding bishop of American Methodism quickly tired of the pace he set. Nearly half of those preachers who died before 1847 were less than 30 years old. Many were too worn out to travel. The ministers traveled a “circuit” or “charge” and were responsible for visiting each charge once a year, all the while starting up new charges when they could. The men went by foot or on horseback and lived on a meager \$64 a year, boasting that “they did not preach for pay.” [Steele, p.7]

What happened to the Methodists? For a time before they built Wesley Chapel in 1822, they worshiped at Antioch, a log meeting house near the current

Johnsville Road. This is most likely where the Methodists were meeting instead of at the Episcopal chapel of ease.

When it seemed that Methodism would continue to thrive in Eldersburg, Helena and John Welsh (a niece and a cousin of the John Welsh who had donated land for the Episcopal chapel of ease) sold part of a tract called *Perseverance* for five dollars to build a Methodist church. The original trustees were Elisha Bennett, Daniel Elliott, Matthew Chambers, Lewis Shipley, Samuel Gore, Nicholas Harden, and John Elder had their assignment: to build a “Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America.”



Holy Trinity Episcopal Church was built in 1771 in present-day Eldersburg as a chapel of ease so colonial worshippers would not have to travel all the way to St. Thomas’s Parish Church in Garrison Forest. HSCC collection.

Rev. Samuel Gore, the first lay minister of Wesley Chapel, was the chairman of the building committee, which included Joseph Steele as a member. Trustee John Elder was the builder. His father was the John Elder who was a vestryman in St. Thomas parish. According to tradition, when workers removed a board from the pulpit in the early 20th century, they discovered the following inscription: "John Elder, Contractor, I am 24 years old today, June 24, 1822. Benjamin Forest." No one knows who Benjamin Forest was or where he is buried; yet he and John Elder will always be associated with the building of Wesley Chapel. The church and its graveyard still stand near the intersection of Liberty and Johnsville roads. John Morrow, age 45, had the dubious honor of being the first person to be buried in this hallowed ground on the very day that it was bought—June 20, 1821. [Steele, p. 21]

Built of stone believed to have been quarried from the old Frizzell farm north of the chapel, the church had simple random-width plain wood floors, pews without backs, shutters to regulate light and heat, and a gallery that stretched across the south wall for use by slaves. It was refurbished in 1880 with new pews, an altar rail, green carpeting, and wallpaper imitating classical designs. In 1893 its parishioners purchased an Estey reed organ.

PRESBYTERIANS

Another group in the Freedom area, the Presbyterians, were immigrants from Scotland and Northern Ireland. The typical Scotch-Irish Presbyterian might not have always been pious or



Wesley Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church (1822) was an offshoot of the Church of England. Several of its founders had attended Holy Trinity and had been swayed to Methodism. Wesley Chapel and its early burial grounds still exist on Liberty Road in Eldersburg. HSCC collection.

zealous, but he was very proud of the fact that his ancestors had stood up to kings and oppressors. The church's "ministers were educated men, graduates of a university, always respected, however tyrannous or ungracious their lives. The church demanded of its members scrupulous knowledge of the Bible and the catechisms, regular attendance at worship, and attention to long theological discourses." [Leyburn, p. 273]

However, what was good for the Presbyterian in Scotland was not necessarily good for the American Presbyterian pioneer. In Scotland a prospective member would go to the church for all it provided. In America it was up to the minister to go out into the countryside and preach to the Scotch-Irish wherever he found them. New ways began to replace the Old World ones, with evangelism of prime importance. Like the Anglican rectors, Presbyterian ministers were difficult to find, so new men would have to train to be preachers in the New World. As a result, the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) was founded in 1746 and became the educational and religious capital of the Scotch-Irish in America.



The influx of the Scotch-Irish to this area led to the erection of Springfield Presbyterian Church in 1836. Photo by Diana Scott.

Still, the Presbyterians were losing adherents because thousands of Scotch-Irish had no ministers or churches and were finding it easier to join with the Baptists and Methodists who did not have to wait for their clergy to complete their education. Also, it was easy for these religious groups to form churches as there was no need for permission to be granted by a Presbytery court.

Church services were very long, but the attendees had nothing else to do on a Hebraic sabbath, during which no work or amusement was permitted, and therefore were enthusiastic for the company of the others. A logical, precisely thought-out sermon of an hour and a half, followed by Bible readings, prayers, and hymns, preceded a lunch brought from home, a period of socializing, and then another three-hour afternoon service.

In The Forks a group of Presbyterians decided the need was great enough to warrant a church. George Patterson, known for his agricultural endeavors and one of the wealthiest land owners in the Eldersburg area, donated land from his 2,000-acre Springfield estate in 1835. (Earlier, he had sold 1,000 acres to James Sykes for the development of the town of

Sykesville.) Other Sykesville area men organized into a building committee and became the first board of trustees with the pastor. Joining Chairman Patterson were William Baer, William H. Warfield, Dr. Homer Goldsborough, Warner W. Warfield, and Aquilla Day. It is interesting to note how the building proceeded. Mr. Baer contacted Mr. Riley for 200 perch of quarried stone at a cost of \$77.27. Baer, Warfield, and another building committee member, R. D. Hewitt, were hired to cut down, haul, and hew the timber to 12-inch square, 20-foot lengths at a rate of 2 cents

per square foot. Then Simon Fleagle was contracted to build the walls from the hewn wood at a reduced price: 87½ cents per perch.

Because of the efforts of these men, an eye-catching three-story structure of coursed rubble stone covered in stucco arose at the top of today's Spout Hill in Sykesville. A center door with columns on either side was reached by a massive granite stairway with a tripart window centered above it. Eight-over-eight sash windows underlined by white stone sills adorned the second and third floor. Inside, servants and slaves used a gallery at the back of the church. The basement of the building housed Springfield Academy, the first organized school in what is now the town of Sykesville.

The Pattersons, Browns, and Beasmans, along with other locally prominent community members, are buried in the cemetery behind the church. The edifice was originally known as the First Presbyterian Church of Baltimore County, but when Carroll County was founded in 1837, the General Assembly of Maryland changed the church's name to the Springfield Presbyterian Church of Carroll County. It continued to carry a large membership

until after the Civil War when many new churches came into the county, thinning the membership of existing ones.

FREEDOM DISTRICT

With the formation of Carroll County from parts of Baltimore and Frederick Counties in 1837 came the founding of election districts. Freedom District was named by Colonel John O'Donald. He was a kind man who "gave the alternate lots to those who purchased lots, and his liberality and *freedom* in his transactions gave the name of the village to the district." [Scharf, 877]

By delving into the past, one can hope to understand the community in which she or he lives a bit better. The religious landscape in 2010 shows the continuing presence of the Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, but it also reveals the existence of Catholics and Lutherans as well as many more recent denominations—topics for another day.

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The cemetery behind Springfield Presbyterian Church includes these imposing gravestones of the Patterson and Brown families. Photo by Diana Scott.

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