



B.T. Roberts
(1823-93)

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

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Paying for Pews

Renting or purchasing pews was very common in American churches in 1860, when the Free Methodist Church was founded. A family pew could rent for as much as \$100 a year, or be bought and sold as personal property.

The Marston Memorial Historical Center has bills of sale for pews in a Methodist Episcopal Church in Massachusetts, written in very precise legal language. Receipts were often issued to those who paid for pews. In some churches pews were sold to a family, thereby becoming part of the estate their heirs would inherit. If they should move away, they had the right to sell all or part of their pew to another family.

Quarterly class meeting tickets were also issued by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Examples can be seen at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, New York, the Marston Memorial Historical Center, and the archives of Seattle First Free Methodist Church. The ticket on display in Seattle, two by three inches in size, documents class meeting membership in 1863 in a Methodist Episcopal church, apparently in the eastern United States. The ticket is signed by the preacher, John Young. Both the member and the pastor signed the ticket. The member's name is connected to a family that moved to Seattle in 1873.

Pew rental sounds strange today, but it was a major fundraising device in the 1850s. It was particularly odious to B. T. Roberts, however, and part of the reason the denomination was called *Free* Methodist. Roberts charged that by auctioning pews to the highest bidder, "pewed" churches were saying, "We want none in our congregation but those who are able to move in fashionable circles." The exclusive system of pewed churches tended to alienate the masses from religious wor-



1863 Methodist Class Ticket

ship and conveyed an air of inhospitality, even though pew tenants could invite guests to sit with them. Some seats were saved for the poor, but as Roberts commented, poor folk did not wish to advertise their poverty from Sunday to Sunday.

The "free" in Free Methodist is a constant reminder that our church welcomes the poor as well as the prosperous into its fellowship, without discrimination.

— Norma Cathey, Seattle, WA

Living in God's Presence

We must all soon meet One in whose presence the greatest potentates of earth sink into utter insignificance. Words are wanting to denote the majesty of this Being whom we are to meet. . . .

Then be in haste to put away all thy sins and come to God by faith to have thy heart made pure. Live as in His presence. Let your words be simple and true and kind, and calculated to make others better.

— B. T. Roberts, "Meeting God," *The Earnest Christian* (June 1890), 190, 191.

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GENE ALSTON, JULIA S HONORED IN SPENCERVILLE

A week-long commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Free Methodist campground in Spencerville, Maryland, culminated on July 16, 2006, with a celebration of the lives and ministries of Julia A. Shelhamer and Dr. Gene R. Alston. On that Sunday the Gene R. Alston Memorial Camp Museum and the adjacent Julia A. Shelhamer Serenity Garden were formally dedicated to honor these two Christian leaders who were in different ways pioneers in the Free Methodist Church.

Thanks to the persistence of Don and Marti Theune and others, the Spencerville Camp has now been designated as a historic landmark. A cabin on the grounds has been refurbished and turned into a museum. Dedicated to the memory of Rev. Gene Alston, who died in 2005, the museum displays documents and artifacts from the camp's seventy-five year history. Especially significant are the scrapbooks and photo albums of the Free Methodist mission work that the late Julia Shelhamer started with her sister, the late Helen Arnold, on the northwest side of Washington, D.C. in 1947. Photographs from the mission portray a vital ministry of the Free Methodist Church in our nation's capital. Many African American youth were touched permanently through this ministry in the heart of the city.

Gene R. Alston was one of those whose lives were transformed by God through the ministry of the Washington mission. Julia Shelhamer mentored him, and with her support he later graduated from both Greenville College and Asbury Theological Seminary, where he was the first African American student. Alston served the Free Methodist

Church as a pastor and in other capacities as well as teaching public school. For some years he served as principal of the Free Methodist School in Shreveport, Louisiana. He moved to Alton, Illinois, where he was assistant pastor at the Free Methodist Church while teaching in the public schools of that area. During this period Alston earned a Ph.D. at St. Louis University.

The Dedication Service

People came from across the country for the 75th anniversary celebration. Many current and former campers were in attendance. Marti Theune, who with her husband Don has worked many hours to collect, restore, refurbish, and display historical mementos, led the dedication ceremony.

Pastor Wayne and Mrs. Mary Lou Lawton of the Cedar Hill Community Church, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, shared reminiscences of the Washington, DC FM Mission. The Lawtons took over the work at the I Street mission in 1959 and knew both Gene Alston and Julia Shelhamer very well. Mrs. Shirley Alston, Gene's widow, who drove in from St. Louis, Missouri, with friends, expressed gratitude for her husband's memorial. "He would be pleased," she said. Several former mission personnel shared comments as well, and Maryland-Virginia Conference Superintendent David Harvey gave the dedicatory prayer.

After the dedication service, Wayne and Mary Lou Lawton and former mission worker Virginia Nottingham, along with a half dozen former "mission kids," sat on the front porch reminiscing and viewing slides from their childhood days at the mission and the camp they attended in Crewe, Virginia.

The newly-dedicated museum collection covers a wide spectrum of articles. Several of Dr. Alston's personal items are prominently displayed in the front room of the museum. Other items include Depression glass, photographs, a 1920s-era refrigerator, camp rules, kitchen utensils, and handcrafted furniture. Also displayed are period clothing and linens, Bibles, hymnals, diaries, historic reference



Julia Shelhamer, 1951



◁ Julia shelhamer, front row, third and Gene Alston back row, second are among delegates and friends pictured at the 2nd National Convention, Department of Interracial Evangelism held at St. Louis, MO, Oct 1954.

HELHAMER E MEMORIAL

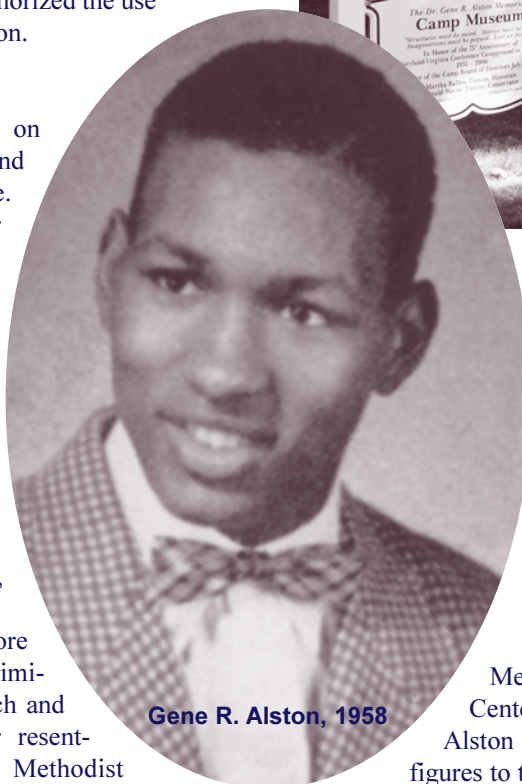
books, documented personal stories, and samples of camp, conference and church histories. The old organ from the Spencerville Free Methodist Church is included; it was built in the early 1900s but did not make its way into the Free Methodist Church until the 1940s, when the General Conference authorized the use of instrumental music in the denomination.

Tributes to Gene Alston

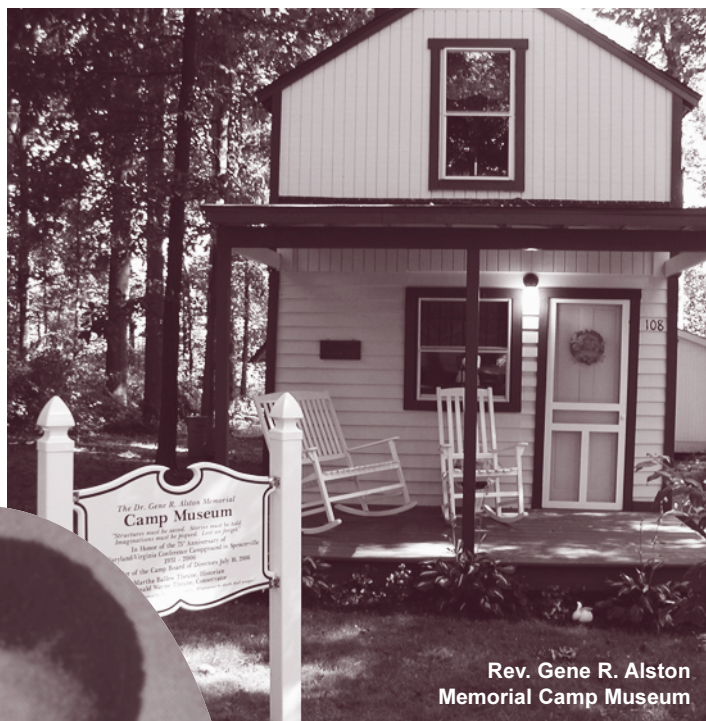
After Gene Alston died suddenly on February 14, 2005, several friends and acquaintances wrote words of tribute. Wayne Lawton wrote, “Julia Shelhamer would take Gene with her on ‘deputation’ during the summers to camp meetings everywhere. He would recite Scripture and other well known recitations such as ‘The Prodigal Son’ by [African American poet and hymnist] James Weldon Johnson. Gene could have been an actor in Hollywood—but God had higher purposes for him.”

Another personal friend, Pastor Howard Olver (Kingsview FM Church, Toronto), wrote:

There are few people I respect more than Gene Alston. He endured discrimination at the hands of his own church and denomination without bitterness or resentment. In fact, he loved the Free Methodist Church and gave everything of himself that the church would accept. He was capable of prophetic vision without a harsh spirit—not a common quality. Gene was gentle and gracious but not weak and apathetic. As much as anyone I know, Gene Alston lived out the words of our mutual mentor



Gene R. Alston, 1958



Rev. Gene R. Alston
Memorial Camp Museum

and teacher, Gilbert James:

“Patience without lassitude
Courage without aggression
Meekness without timidity
Confrontation without hostility.”

Gene Alston was a dear friend, a true brother and a comrade in ministry, and he deserves all the reward heaven can hold. The world, and the Free Methodist Church, will be much poorer without him.

Cathy Fortner, Director of the Marston Memorial Historical Center, represented the Center at the July 16 dedication. She writes, “Dr. Alston and Julia Shelhamer are important historical figures to the Maryland-Virginia Conference and to the Free Methodist church in general. Through this museum and garden area, it is hoped that many will take notice of their stories and those of other pioneers of our faith and be inspired to serve the Lord with the same fervency.”

News & Notes

▷ EXTRA COPIES of the Newsletter are available free of charge upon request (up to ten copies to one address). If you wish to send current or back issues to friends or family, contact the Historical Center by phone or letter or by email at History@fmcna.org.

▷ PASTORS' SABBATICAL PROGRAM applications are now available. Contact the Historical Center for information on scholarships and scheduling.

LETTERS

I was interested in Miriam Olver's article, “Grandpa Does the Home Study Course,” in the last newsletter. I remember my father saying after hearing Brother Lindsley preach at a quarterly meeting, “You always learn something new when Brother Lindsley preaches.”

— A. Lewis Payne, Ouaquaga, NY

I appreciate the review of Zaragoza's book *No Longer Servants, But Friends* in the

last newsletter but respectfully disagree with the idea of adopting this as a model for ministry. The apostle Paul, the apostle Peter, James the brother of the Lord, and Jude specifically refer to themselves as servants of Jesus Christ in New Testament epistles. I choose to ponder both ideas, but continue to feel that servanthood is the better model. Jesus himself said that he came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom.

— John Baker, Phoenix, AZ

Book Review

Salt of the Sea: A Navy Chaplain's Experience Ashore and at Sea, by E. Dean Cook (Xulon Press, 2005). 259pp. ISBN 1-59781-711-2 (paper).

In *Horatio Hornblower*, the story's daring and honorable namesake reminds us that a sailor's life, after all, should be at sea. In his memoir, *Salt of the Sea*, Dean Cook introduces us to the reality that a navy chaplain's job is more complex. A chaplain must serve wherever he or she is called. For Cook it was, alternately, the deck of an aircraft carrier receiving the wounded, Pacific headquarters in Hawaii, a military prison, with the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean, Quantico, Kodiak Island, the living room of a young man or woman, mourning the death of a spouse or coming to terms with an infidelity, and so forth. And yet for all the travel and change in situation, Cook also manages to illumine that there is one great constant in the successful chaplain's career: faith.

Cook relies on anecdotes to tell the story of his thirty years in service. This permits him to get over heavy ground lightly while illustrating the choppy, and sometimes uncharted, waters of ecumenism, military protocol, and evangelism a chaplain must navigate. For instance, Cook relates weighing the evidence in the case of a newly converted Jehovah Witness' plea for conscientious objector status—and siding with the young man. In another instance he finds himself dissuading Christian

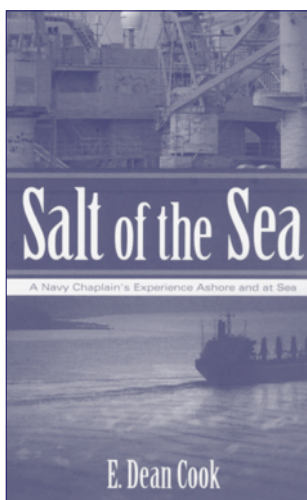
sailors from testing God by praying that their ship will not put out to sea and turning away from God when it does. While abroad an aircraft carrier in the Pacific he discovers a high-ranking officer, "a dedicated Christian," drunk and in the arms of a woman not his wife. At other times he contended with hostile officers who worked to sideline and undercut the chaplaincy, and sometimes Cook personally.

At the same time there are stories of Christian love and community, of repentance and salvation. Cook tells the story of a fun-loving WAVE who wrote him several years later to say that she had accepted Jesus and was very involved in her church.

What is wonderful in Cook's story is that his faith, coupled with an amazingly loving and supportive family, enabled him to perform the real work for which he felt called: Nurturing faith among sailors and winning souls. Stories about his wife, Ruth, and their four sons, attest to the importance of family in performing any job well. A loving and supportive home environment, mixed with Cook's focus, vigor, purpose, and faith ensured his success in the military and his rise to the rank of captain. Laced throughout the story is Cook's conviction that love of God and country go hand in hand.

Cook's career is full of accomplishments—chapels, memorials, Bible groups, and military decorations. It is to the author's credit that when we finish the book what we recall are the stories of Christian love and the fine people met along the way.

— Kate McGinn, Archivist
Marston Memorial Historical Center



Join Us in Spring Arbor

The Marston Memorial Historical Center will be sponsoring three Lecture/Lunches and a workshop during the Free Methodist General Conference at Spring Arbor (Michigan) University, July 7-13, 2007.

Much the same as in Seattle, all who are interested are invited to bring their lunches and participate in the noontime events. They will be held in the Ralph Carey Forum, lower level of the Kresge Student Center. The first lunch session will be on Saturday, July 7, from 12:00 to 1:30. Dr. Jon Kulaga will be presenting on "Edward Payson Hart: Barrister of Holiness."

On Monday, July 9, from 12:00 to 1:30, Dr. Howard Snyder will present "Populist Saints: B. T. and Ellen Roberts and the First Free Methodists."

Then on Wednesday, July 11, from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m., Mission Legacy Stories will be shared.

We will also be hosting an oral history workshop for conference historians, local church historians, and anyone interested in church history. This will be held on Wednesday, July 11, from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. in the lower level of the White Library.

All during General Conference there will be a display booth set up in the exhibition hall where we hope personally to meet many of our Newsletter readers. See you there!

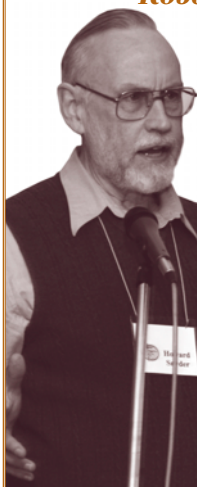
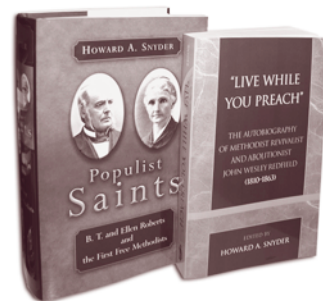
— Cathy Fortner, Director

Newly Released

"Live While You Preach"
The Autobiography of
Methodist Revivalist and
Abolitionist John Wesley
Redfield (1810-1863) \$40.00



Populist Saints:
B.T. and Ellen
Roberts and the First Free Methodists
\$29.25 (special discounted price)



Dr. Howard A. Snyder, recently retired professor of the History and theology of Mission at the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism, Asbury Theological Seminary. He is the author of both books released in 2006 as well as a series of books on the church and its form and mission.

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