

## CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath December 3, 2006

### PART 10: TROUBLES

We come now to a time that was very difficult for Wesley and is difficult to summarize. To set the time frame, recall that Wesley arrived at Savannah on Friday, February 6, 1736. He sailed from there for England on Thursday, December 22, 1737 and stepped back on English soil on February 1, 1738. It was mentioned previously that there was continuing friction with Mr. Oglethorpe and the Georgia trustees over ministry to Savannah vs. a mission to the Indians. Now a more immediate difficulty is created, mainly between March 4, 1737 and Wesley's abrupt departure on December 22, 1737.

Very soon after Wesley arrived in Georgia he made the acquaintance of Sophia Christiana Hopkey. She was the niece of the wife of Thomas Causton, chief magistrate of Savannah. The relationship became very close. He taught Sophia French; she tended him through a time of fever; she also dressed in white to please him. Delmotte, Wesley's travel companion, inquired if Wesley meant to marry Sophia and it is certain that Wesley proposed to her. He even went so far as to offer to alter his way of life to gain her acceptance; but she withheld it. In the spirit of his Moravian friends Wesley referred his case to them and "after hesitation" agreed to abide by their decision, which was "to proceed no further." This was probably March 4, 1737. On March 8 Sophia and William Williamson became engaged and were married on March 12. (This seems very soon and it must have been a civil ceremony.) Sophia showed her husband the letters that Wesley had written to her, at which point he forbade his wife from attending either Wesley's chapel or house in the future. Evidently Sophia did attend, however, as she was present at the communion service on July 3. (This had to be deliberate because at that time people had to declare their intention of receiving communion a day before in order to be certified as fit to partake.) To quote from Wesley's Journal:

Immediately after communion I mentioned to Mrs. Williamson some things which I thought were reprobable in her behavior. At this she appeared very angry; she said she did not expect such usage from me; at the turn in the street, through which we were walking home, she went abruptly away. The next day Mrs. Causton endeavored to excuse her; told me she was exceedingly grieved for what had passed the day before and desired of me to tell her in writing what I disliked; which accordingly I did the day following.

First, however, he sent a note to Mr. Causton, which caused him to visit Wesley and there was a "warm exchange." Things continued to heat up and on August 7 Wesley expelled Mrs. Williamson from Holy Communion. On August 8 Mr. Williamson obtained a warrant for Wesley's arrest for defamation and set damages at 1,000 pound, a huge amount. A grand jury of 44 was convened and found a true bill of ten articles of indictment. Wesley repeatedly protested, correctly, that nine of them were purely ecclesiastical and not in the jurisdiction of a civil court. Only the first article, alleging communication with Mrs. Williamson contrary to her husband's order, was in their jurisdiction.

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There were numerous court appearances over the next few months. On December 2 an order was issued forbidding Wesley from leaving the province. Wesley departed that evening after dark to avoid officials. As he says in his Journal, "I shook the dust off my feet and left Georgia, after having preached the Gospel there (not as I ought to, but as I was able) one year and nearly nine months." There were difficulties in getting to the docks, including getting lost in the woods on the way. There were several storms during the voyage and some unfavorable winds at the end that delayed their landing even though land was in sight.

They were finally able to step onto English soil on February 1, 1738. George Whitefield, a fellow worker with the Wesleys in England, had just departed for America a day or so before. Had they met, Wesley would have tried to prevent his going. More on this next week, stay tuned.