Richard Boardman: American Methodism's First Superintendent

Kenneth Cain Kinghorn

Richard Boardman (1738-1782) has the distinction of being the first Methodist missionary and first superintendent that John Wesley sent to America. Boardman served in America from October 20, 1769 to January 2, 1774. In 1763, at the age of about 25, he had begun to itinerate as a Methodist preacher in England. Prior to coming to America, under John Wesley's supervision Boardman served successively in the Grimsby, Limerick, Cork, and Dales circuits. The latter circuit was situated in a remote rural circuit in a picturesque section of England. The Dales Circuit, with its 43 preaching places and 980 members, required Boardman to cross mountains and twist through rocky ravines. Favorable accounts of his spiritual leadership circulated throughout British Methodist circles, and the conference of preachers held him in high regard. John Wesley developed confidence in him as a better than average preacher and an evenhanded pastor, commenting that he was "a loving peaceable man."  

One often repeated story illustrates Boardman's influence as an effective circuit preacher. Early in his ministry he preached on a passage from 1 Chronicles: "Jabez was more honorable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez... And

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Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying 'O that thou wouldest enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil''... And God granted him that which he requested..." (1 Chro. 4:9, 10). While listening to Boardman's sermon, a young woman, Mary Redfern, "learned the way of God more perfectly," and soon afterwards found "peace with God." She later married William Bunting, and ten years after her conversion she gave birth to a son. Mrs. Bunting named the child, her first born, Jabez, as "a memento of her gratitude and a prophecy of his [Jabez's] history." She carried her infant son, Jabez, to Oldham Street Chapel and presented him to John Wesley for his blessing. At about age fifteen Jabez Bunting joined a Methodist society, devoted his life to God, and eventually became British Methodism's most significant leader after John Wesley. This account illustrates the lasting effects of Boardman's preaching.

Those six years in the Methodist itinerancy included four of those years as Wesley's assistant in charge of the other preachers on the circuit. In January 1769, Boardman's wife, Olive, and his daughter, Mary, died. Quarterly meeting records show that Boardman received two pounds and two shillings "for burn Isic his wife." Within several months of the loss of his family, Boardman would embark on his American adventure.

In the meantime, American Methodism had begun under the ministries of Robert Strawbridge in Maryland and Philip Embury in New York. In addition, George Whitefield had sown seeds somewhat of a Methodist variety. Although American Methodism had taken root, the fledgling movement lacked official leadership and had no links with British Methodism. George Whitefield was probably the first to urge John Wesley to send preachers to America. In September 1764, Whitefield wrote from Philadelphia, "Here is room for a hundred itinerants. Lord Jesus, send by whom Thou wilt send." After returning to England Whitefield continued to plead for Wesley to send missionaries to America. Wesley, however, was frustrated over the lack of preachers. In a letter to Whitefield, he wrote, "We are so far from having any travelling preachers to spare that there are not enough to supply the people that earnestly call for them. I have been this very year [1767] at my wits' end upon the account." Others implored Wesley to send preachers to America, including Thomas Webb. Wesley, however, moved slowly in his response. Were not the "lost sheep of England" his first responsibility?

On April 11, 1768, Thomas Taylor, an English emigrant to America, appealed to Wesley to send a leader to America to guide the newly emerging Methodist movement:

I must importune your assistance not only in my own name but in the name of the whole society. We want an able, experienced preacher—one who has both gifts and graces necessary for the work.... I wish have a man of wisdom, of sound faith, and a good disciplinarian, one whose heart and soul are in the work; and I doubt not by the goodness of God such a flame would soon be kindled as would never stop until it reached the great South Sea. Dear sir, I entreat you for the good of thousands to use your utmost endeavors to send one over.... With respect to money for the payment of a preacher's passage over, if they could not procure it, we would sell our coats and shirts and pay it. I most earnestly beg an interest in your prayers, and trust you and many of our brethren will not forget the church in this wilderness.
Later that year (1768), Wesley dined with Dr. Carl Magnus von Wrangel, and Wesley’s *Journal* contains a summary of their conversation: “Wrangel...has spent several years in Pennsylvania. His heart seemed to be greatly united to the American Christians, and he strongly pleaded for our sending some of our preachers to help them, multitudes of whom are as sheep without a shepherd.” At about the same time, Thomas Bell of Charlestown wrote that the Americans “are running wild after this world.... And are not these lost sheep? And will none of the [English] preachers come here?” When Webb, Taylor, Wrangel, and Bell appealed for missionaries for America, the Methodist Society in New York was about three years old.

Four months after Taylor wrote to Wesley, the British Methodist Conference met at Bristol. One of Wesley’s preachers, Joseph Pilmore, tells that the 1768 Methodist Conference in Bristol discussed this call from America for able preachers, but that conference took no definite action regarding the several requests from America for a missionary. The following year the British Methodist preachers met again, this time at Leeds (August 1, 1769). Once again, John Wesley presented to the Methodist Conference the Americans’ urgent appeal for able preachers. Wesley recounted that occasion in his little book *Short History of People Called Methodists*:

Tuesday, August 1, 1779, our conference began at Leeds. On Thursday I mentioned the case of our brethren at New York. For some years past several of our brethren from England and Ireland (and some of them preachers) had settled in North America, and had in various places formed societies, particularly in Philadelphia and New York. The society at New York had lately built a commodious preaching-house, and now desired our help, being in great want of money, but much more of preachers

The conference selected and commissioned two volunteers—Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore. Wesley expressed satisfaction with the 1769 Leeds Conference, which closed on Friday, August 4, judging that “a more loving one we never had.” Wesley stated that Boardman and Pilmore “were well reported of by all, and, we believe, fully qualified for the work.” Boardman was Pilmore’s senior by a few months, and Boardman had itinerated twice as long as Pilmore. Boardman had served as an assistant; Pilmore had not. Thus, Wesley designated Boardman as his assistant in America, effectively making him the first superintendent of American Methodism.

The 1787 American Methodist *Discipline* verifies that Boardman and Pilmore were the “first regular Methodist preachers on the Continent,” by which was meant that the British Methodist conference had sent them to America by formal conference action. Although the British Conference consisted of poorly paid preachers, its members provided 20 pounds for the ship passages for Boardman and Pilmore and 50 pounds (the equivalent of $350) as an expression of fraternal love for the Americans. John Wesley’s British Conference set an American Methodist precedent of *sending* preachers to their appointments, rather than congregations *calling* them.

In the days immediately prior to Boardman’s and Pilmore’s sailing to America, they met with George Whitefield who prayed for them and commended them to God.
Recalling that meeting, Pilmore wrote, "As he [Whitefield] had been long in America, he knew what directions to give us and treated us with all the kindness and tenderness of a father in Christ. Variance of theological sentiment made no difference in love and affection. He prayed heartily for us, and commended us to God and to the word of his grace; so we parted in love, hoping soon to meet where parting is no more." 

Boardman and Pilmore also conversed with Charles Wesley, who encouraged them greatly. Pilmore’s journal recounts his and Boardman’s meeting with Charles Wesley:

Charles met the Society, and afterwards sent for Mr. Boardman and me into his room, where he spoke freely and kindly to us about our…voyage, and the important business in which we had engaged. After giving us much good advice, he sent us forth with his blessing in the name of the Lord. This was of great advantage to us as it afforded us the pleasing reflection that we had not acted contrary to the minds of our brethren and fathers in Christ. 

The two Methodist missionaries boarded the ship Mary and Elizabeth and sailed for the new world of America. 

Boardman was 31 years old, eager, and committed to this new mission to America. Soon after the voyage began, he preached on shipboard on the text, "The great day of His wrath is come and who shall be able to stand?" (Rev. 6:17). Passengers and crewmembers responded so favorably to the sermon that Boardman and Pilmore held another service on deck that afternoon. However, storms set in, and seasickness forced the two missionaries to suspend services. The ocean voyage, lasting nine weeks, proved long, tedious, and unpleasant. After arriving in America, Boardman wrote John Wesley, 

Several said there had not, in the memory of the oldest man of the Continent, been such hard gales of wind, as those for a few month past. Many vessels have been lost; while others got in with lots of masts, and much damage to their cargoes. We observed shipwrecks all along the coast of the Delaware. 

Boardman told of experiencing God’s presence and comfort through the trying voyage. 

In rough, stormy weather, particularly when it appeared impossible that the vessel should live long amidst the conflicting elements, I found myself exceedingly happy, and rest satisfied that death would be gain. I do not remember to have had one doubt of being eternally saved, should the mighty waters swallow us up. This was the Lord’s doing! O may it ever be marvellous [sic] in my eyes. 

On October 24, 1769, Boardman and Pilmore landed at Gloucester Point, New Jersey, six miles south of Philadelphia. A stone monument, placed by the New Jersey Area of the United Methodist Church in 1969, marks the spot where the two Methodist missionaries landed. The marker reads,
This Monument
Commemorates the Landing Here
October 21, 1769
Of Joseph Pilmore & Richard Boardman
First Methodist Preachers Appointed to America by
The Rev. John Wesley.

The Americans warmly welcomed the new missionaries. In Philadelphia a Methodist society of about 100 persons expressed the desire to be in connection with John Wesley. Pilmore began his American ministry there, and Boardman went to New York.

At this point, a note on dress holds some interest. The manner of dress was important to the early Methodists, as evident in the first Disciplines. American Methodist preachers were to “avoid every superfluity of dress and to speak frequently and faithfully against it in all societies.” Coke’s and Asbury’s notes in the 1798 Discipline state,

As our one aim, in all our economy and ministerial labours, is to raise a holy people, crucified to the world, and alive to God, we cannot allow of any thing which has an immediate tendency to defeat our main design, and to strengthen and puff up the carnal mind. Few things, perhaps, have a greater tendency to this than gay apparel, which is expressly and repeatedly forbidden by the scriptures.

Boardman and Pilmore conformed, for the most part, to Wesley’s Advice to the People Called Methodists, with Regard to Dress. When riding, they wore leggings. The early Methodist preachers shunned pantaloons and frock coats.

Joshua Marsden, an English Methodist preacher stationed in Nova Scotia visited the United States in 1802 and recorded his impressions. He wrote,

The bishops, Asbury and Whatcoat, were plain, simple, venerable persons, both in dress and manners. Their costume was that of former times, the colour drab, the waistcoat with large laps, and both coat and waistcoat without any collar; their plain stocks and low-crowned, broad-brimmed hats bespoke their deadness to the trifling ornaments of dress. In a word, their appearance was simplicity itself.

However, Boardman and Pilmore retained some English touches to their dress. They wore wigs and silk stockings. A Cash Book at St. George’s Church records that on June 8, 1770, thirteen shillings was paid to Boardman for silk stockings, which he paid back on July 16. Boardman’s and Pilmore’s dress consisted of “a broad-brimmed low crowned, ‘big beaver’ hat...shad-belly coat, with breeches and knee-buckles, white stockings, and a profusion of hair which hung in graceful locks.”

Boardman and Pilmore enjoyed very favorable responses to their preaching ministries. In May, 1770 Pilmore wrote John Wesley,

Our coming to America has not been in vain. The Lord has been pleased to bless our feeble attempts to advance his kingdom in the world. Many have believed the
Report, and unto some, the arm of the Lord has been revealed. There begins to be a shaking among the dry bones; and they come together that God may breathe upon them. Our congregations are large, and we have the pious of most congregations to hear us, which makes the Presbyterian bigots mad! But we are fully determined not to retaliate. 24

True to the Methodist itinerant system, Boardman and Pilmore exchanged places frequently, two to three times a year. Both preachers found an eager response among their hearers, and many of them came to know Jesus Christ. 25 As superintendent, Boardman gave invaluable influence and guidance to the American Methodists. Discussing Boardman’s ministry, historian J. B. Wakeley evaluated him as “a man of good common sense, of deep and ardent piety, and a preacher of superior talents ... a man of great simplicity and goodly sincerity.” 26

Boardman found much satisfaction in his ministry, and he wrote John Wesley about the response of the Americans:

Our House contains about seventeen hundred (the typesetter who transcribed the letter probably misread seven hundred (which also seems large) hearers. About a third part of those who attend get in; the rest are glad to hear without. There appears such a willingness in the Americas to hear the word as I never saw before. They have no preaching in some parts of the Back Settlements. I doubt not but an effectual door will be opened among them. O may the Most High now give His Son the heathen for His inheritance! 27

In all his successes, Boardman remained remarkably humble about his accomplishments. His surviving letters contain references to his sense of unworthiness for the ministry of Christ. On November 4, 1769, he had written John Wesley, “I find a great want of every gift and grace, for the great work before me.” 28

Although Boardman and Pilmore possessed different personalities, they enjoyed an abiding friendship, free from jealousy. When they met together, they rejoiced in one another’s ministerial successes. On one occasion Pilmore journeyed to New York City, arriving on a Wednesday at 8:00 p.m. He recalled,

Knowing it was preaching night, we hastened to the chapel and found Mr. Boardman preaching the word of God with life and power. My heart greatly rejoiced at the sight of him, and my spirit was united in close fellowship with him. God has made us like David and Jonathan. Our souls are bound together in love. 29

Three times a year Boardman and Pilmore exchanged circuits between New York and Philadelphia. They also made preaching excursions to several remote places, where they usually found enthusiastic responses to their ministries. However, in some sections they encountered spiritual apathy. On May 25, probably in 1773, Boardman wrote to Mary Thorne,
The rides are long, the roads bad, and the living very poor. But what more than compensates for these difficulties is a prospect of advancing the Redeemer’s kingdom in bringing sinners to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. In the greater part of this round the people were wicked and ignorant to a most lamentable degree, destitute of the fear and regardless of the worship of God. But such a reformation is wrought among them as shows the amazing love and almighty power of God.

In the spring of 1772, Boardman toured New England, where he preached in Providence, and also in Boston, where he organized a class. It was Richard Boardman, not Jesse Lee, who first took Methodism into New England. However, James Mudge, historian of the New England Conference, hints that Boardman’s efforts in Boston (“that Calvinistic area”) failed to produce lasting results.

Among Boardman’s first American converts was John Mann, who became an effective Methodist preacher. During the British occupation of New York City, Mann supplied the pulpit at John Street Methodist Church and helped preserve Methodism in that city during the colonists’ conflict with England. From time to time John Mann met with Francis Asbury and reported on the progress of the war in New York. However, Mann’s royalist sympathies eventually led him to move to Nova Scotia, where he continued to preach. He and his brother, James, deserve credit for helping Freebom Garrettson and William Black plant Methodism in Nova Scotia. Mann died there after serving as a Methodist preacher for about forty-five years.

On November 4, 1769, Boardman wrote John Wesley that the people were so hungry to hear the word of God that only one-third of them could cram into the preaching place. A layman, Edward Evans, who lived in Philadelphia, wrote John Wesley, “Your dear young men, I mean Brother Boardman and Brother Pilmore, have been a welcome and an acceptable present to us.... I find them truly sincere, and heartily concerned for the good cause. Their fervency and labour therein greatly delights me. The Lord is with them, and owns and blesses them greatly to the people.”

In April 1771 Boardman wrote John Wesley the following news.

This last month we have had near thirty added to the Society, five of whom have received a clear sense of the pardoning love of God. We have, in this city, some of the best preachers...that are in America; yet God works by whom he will work.... I bless God I find, in general, my soul happy, though much tried and tempted apparently due to his poor health: and though I am often made to groan, oppressed ISIC with unbelief; yet I find an increasing degree of love to God, his people, and his ways. But I want more purity of intention, to aim at his glory in all I think, or speak or do.

Accounts of Boardman’s influence among the Americans are highly complementary; he was greatly beloved by many. The Arminian Magazine (1818) declared that “Boardman’s ministry was blessed to hundreds.” Francis Asbury declared, “My friend Boardman is a kind, loving, worthy man, truly amiable and entertaining, and of a child-like temper.”

As the Revolutionary War approached, numerous Church of England clergymen—
branded as Tories—returned to their homeland. This Anglican exodus was extensive. Wesley's missionaries to America also fell under heavy suspicion, even persecution. Eventually almost all of them left this country. By late 1773 Boardman and Pilmore concluded that their tenure in America was closing. So they decided to return to England.

Prior to leaving America, the two preached farewell sermons throughout the circuits. Pilmore described one of those occasions:

The place was pretty well filled with attentive hearers, and the God of all grace gave us his blessing.... O that he may keep us still, and continually guide us in the way that we should go; then shall we be constantly happy, and his work will prosper in our hands.


On reaching England, Boardman entered into a fruitful ministry in Ireland. Except for one year, he continued serving Methodist circuits as a powerful preacher until his death eight years later. His final preaching appointment was in Cork, Ireland. The Sunday before he died he preached from the text, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." On Sunday, September 29, 1782, as Boardman walked to dinner, blindness struck him. Soon convulsions shook him and he lost "speech and understanding." Remarkably, the following day he preached morning and evening, with calm mind and serene spirit. On October 4, at a prayer meeting, observers reported that he prayed with an uncommon degree of freedom and power. That evening at about nine o'clock he died in the presence of friends. A company of Christians buried him in the churchyard of St. Barry's (St. Fin Barre's) Cathedral in Cork. The plain tombstone marking his grave contains this inscription:

Beneath this stone the dust of Boardman lies,  
His precious soul has soared above the skies;  
With eloquence Divine he preach'd the word  
To multitudes, and turn'd them to the Lord  
His bright examples strengthen'd what he taught,  
And devils trembled when for Christ he fought;  
With truly Christian zeal he nations fired,  
And all who knew him mourn'd when he expired.

Charles Atmore, who later became the president of the British Methodist Conference, wrote a short memorial of Richard Boardman: "He was a man of great piety, of an amiable disposition, and possessed of strong understanding. He was greatly beloved, and universally respected by the people wherever his lot was cast. His ministerial labours were much owned of God, both in Europe and America." Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore left indelible marks on early American Methodism. These first two British Methodist missionaries to America itinerated in this country fifty months. Yet, their enduring influence remains. Frank Bateman Stanger judged, "Their 'small step' on American soil proved to be a 'giant leap' for the Christianizing of mankind in the New World."
Richard Boardman: American Methodism’s First Superintendent

The ministry of Richard Boardman impressed itself on the American Methodist preachers who followed in his train. Specifically, he modeled the indispensability of evangelism, the necessity of study, and the importance of pastoral care.

**Evangelism.** Winning converts stood out as a central focus of Boardman’s ministry. From such records as we have, it is clear that he remained sensitive to every evangelistic occasion he encountered. Not willing to wait for some future time to invite persons to Jesus Christ, whenever an opportunity occurred he presented the Gospel and issued an invitation to Christian discipleship. Even Boardman’s correspondence contained evangelistic pleas. To Captain Samuel Parker, Boardman wrote,

> no Peace, no Comfort, no Security out of God; O to give him all our hearts is indeed the one thing needful! God is indeed a Jealous [sic] God, and wont [sic] be rob’d of his glory. Christ is Worthy of our suprains [sic] love, and Service, and Praise, if we forsake him but in affection; he will Visit us with Stripes; how many; how long will it last? Ah, Who can tell? How much has our gracious Redeemer to bear, and Suffer wh [sic] Isicl us. He is Love! Infinite in Compassion! Let us then give him our love, our service’s our hearts much Prayer, I am sure will do us much good. . and will not be labour lost. . we have an advocate. Him, the Father heareth always—"

Nathan Bangs tells that the people were “ripe for the gospel” and that “multitudes flocked to hear the word, and many were induced to seek an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Boardman’s passion for evangelism echoes throughout the journal of Joseph Pilmore, his colleague. Their mutual interest in evangelism ran parallel. When Pilmore first saw North Carolina he exclaimed, “O that the great master of the Vineyard would raise up and thrust out laborers unto His field such as will not hold back their peace day nor night, but constantly run to and fro that the knowledge of God be increased, and poor wandering sinners brought into the fold of Christ.” Boardman’s journal, if he wrote one, did not survive. However, from a few letters and contemporary accounts we gain occasional dates, impressions, and details pertaining to his ministry. Uniformly, Boardman’s contemporaries regarded him as pleasant, congenial, and a better-than-average preacher who, despite his poor health, excelled in evangelism. Every conversion he witnessed or heard about filled him with great joy. Despite his evangelistic fruitfulness, he always credited his successes to God’s working. A typical instance of his modesty appears in a letter he sent to Wesley April 2, 1771. “It pleases God to carry on his work among us. Within this month we have had a great awakening here…. God works by whom he will work.”

Due in part to Boardman’s evangelistic labors, the number of circuits in America increased steadily. Toward the end of Boardman’s and Pilmore’s stay in America, Pilmore wrote, “It is now near four years since Mr. Boardman and I arrived in America, we have constantly laboured in the great work of the Lord, and have preached the Gospel through the Continent for more than a thousand miles, and formed many Societies, and have aboute [sic] a thousand Members, most of whom are well grounded the doctrins [sic] of the Gospel, and savingly converted unto God. This hath God wrought, and we will exalt and glorify His adoreable [sic] name.”

Historian John Atkinson concluded, “But for [Boardman’s and Pilmore’s] presence here...
from the fall of 1769 until the beginning of 1774 the history of Methodism in this country might have been different from what it is. Well-poised men were they, discreet, cultured, holy, eloquent, lovers of mankind and aflame with zeal for Christ. Their work was wrought in love and its effects are immortal. Boardman’s Wesleyan message of free salvation for seekers and full salvation for every believer helped shape the evangelistic passion and preaching of the next generation of American Methodist circuit riders.

Study. We cannot call Boardman a professional scholar—such was not his calling—yet he gave careful attention to the cultivation of his mind. True to the example of John Wesley, he believed in the unity of the warm heart and the informed mind. Three years prior to Boardman’s departure for America, John Wesley referred to Boardman’s penchant for learning. In a letter to Mrs. Johnston, Wesley wrote, “Mr. Hem and Boardman are adapted to an higher class, men of taste and education; and a few even of these in almost every place are persuaded to choose the better part."

Boardman believed that salvation touches all areas of our lives and that deliverance from ignorance is a natural complement to deliverance from sin. When Boardman’s ship set sail for America, immediately he began to read. On August 21, 1769, he wrote, “In the morning we weighed anchor and dropped down the river as far as Deal, but the wind proving contrary, we were obliged to lay at anchor...for several days. While we lay in the Downs I had fine opportunity for study, and found my mind in general much resigned to the will of God.”

The American Methodist Societies economized by allowing Boardman and Pilmore only four quires of paper a year. They overcame this shortsighted policy by purchasing extra paper out of their meager salaries. This practice underscores the importance they attached to their studies. Despite continuous travel and numerous inconveniences, Boardman continued to improve his mind by continual reading. His and Pilmore’s diligent study habits helped set the pace for other Methodist preachers.

Pastoral care. Boardman exercised diligent pastoral oversight. As soon as he began his work in New York, he put into operation the Methodist system of regulations. In the first place, he encouraged adherence to the General Rules, the standard Methodist guidelines for Christian living. In accordance with Wesley’s instructions to read the General Rules to the members of the societies at least once a year, Boardman kept the rules before the Methodist people by reading them to the congregations. Boardman’s colleague Joseph Pilmore recorded in his journal that, on his second Sunday in America, he preached in Philadelphia, where he “read and explained the Rules of the Society to a vast multitude of serious people.” According to American Methodism’s first historian, Jesse Lee, the American Methodist societies agreed to follow the General Rules. Boardman and Pilmore were doubtless critical influences in establishing this practice.

Also, Boardman exercised pastoral care by stressing the importance of class meetings. In early American Methodism the class leaders served as sub-pastors. Customarily, they met weekly with the members of the classes. Absentee members received a home visit from the class leaders. As needs dictated, these visits included religious counsel, advice, and encouragement. The class leaders reported regularly to the circuit preachers, drawing attention to any members who required special attention. The class meetings kept every Methodist connected with the society in a per-
sonal way. This extended pastoral care kept many a Methodist from straying from
the fold.

Historian David Holsclaw summarized the importance of the class meeting in early
American Methodism:

Early American Methodists assumed that close pastoral attention was vital for the
development of healthy churches. No matter how carefully new members were
screened, their continued spiritual growth was never automatic. Left to themselves,
they would be no stronger than a “rope of sand,” and many would suffer the fate of
Whitefield’s converts. Methodists believed that the minister’s task was to provide
suitable biblical instruction for his members, to restrain and keep them from evil,
and to warn and reclaim any who became involved in error or sin.64

This pastoral care could not be accomplished through the pulpit alone; the class meetings indi-
vidualized pastoral care for each Methodist “in connection.” Later, Bishop Elijah Hedding con-
tended that personal attention to the needs of the people through class meetings would “pre-
vent apostasies, crimes, and expulsions; which...might scandalize the Church and ruin souls.”65

Boardman’s colleague, Joseph Pilmore, appointed probably the first female class leader
in America—Mary Thorne, a British emigrant to America. She served effectively as a class
leader in Philadelphia during the War of Independence. When the British commandeered
the Methodist meeting house (Old St. George’s Church), she hosted the Methodist
Society in her home. She became a good friend with Joseph Pilmore, Francis Asbury, and
Richard Boardman. She corresponded with them and they with her, affectionately calling
her “Mollie.” On one occasion Boardman wrote Mary Thorne,

I am glad you have two classes; I should have no objection against you having
three. There is a wide difference between being tired of and tired in the service of
God. However, I hope both classes will be taken from you the moment you think
yourself sufficient to be a leader, I look upon a deep sense of insufficiency as a nec-
essary qualification of a class-leader.... God will not forget the work of faith, the
patience of hope and the labor of love.66

In 1778 Mary Thorne returned to England on the same ship as Thomas Rankin. After
arriving in England, through the good offices of Richard Boardman, she met John Wesley,
with whom she and her husband developed a friendship.

In addition to pastoral nurture, the class meetings had another advantage—the develop-
ment of leaders. Often, class leaders became local preachers, or even circuit preachers.
Indeed, the majority of Methodist preachers started their ministries as class leaders.
According to Bishop Matthew Simpson the purpose of the class leaders was “to give such
religious counsel, advice, or encouragement as circumstances may require.” Class leaders
must demonstrate “deep personal piety, mature experience, and ability to give religious
counsel and advice wisely and affectionately, and to influence the younger members to
systematic attention to all their Christian duties.”67 The first American Methodist Discipline
stated, “Let each leader carefully inquire how every soul in his class prospers. Not only
how each person observes the outward rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God. Let the Leaders converse with the Assistant frequently and freely.  

Boardman and Pilmore also introduced love feasts and watch night and covenant services. As Wesley's assistant in charge of American Methodism, Boardman established a preaching schedule for himself and others, known as "the Boardman plan." Under this plan, preachers would hold public services Sunday morning and evening, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and meet with those "in society" each Wednesday evening. Francis Asbury received his first American appointment under the Boardman plan. Boardman continued as Wesley's assistant in America until October 10, 1772, when Wesley named Asbury to the position.  

Boardman also helped establish salaries for the growing number of preachers in the New York area. The salary would be three guineas (about $15), paid each quarter. Accordingly, the early American Methodists often referred to the preacher's salary as "quarterage." This salary paid for clothing and personal items. At that time Methodist preachers had no parsonages; because they moved so frequently they received food and lodging from the people to whom they ministered. The American Methodists did not formally discuss parsonages until the conference of 1800.  

Boardman seems to have had a special empathy for the black community. In 1769 he wrote John Wesley, "The number of Blacks that attend the preaching, affects me much. One of them came to tell me she could neither eat nor sleep, because her Master would not suffer her to come to hear the word. She wept exceedingly, saying, 'I told my Master I would do more work than ever I used to do, if he would be let me come; nay, that I would do every thing in my power to be a good servant.'" In 1771 Boardman wrote Wesley the following paragraph.  

Concerning Boardman's relationship with the black community, as is the case with other matters, one can only lament that such a few pages of Boardman's writings have survived.

As Wesley's first Assistant in America, Boardman's influence on newly recruited Methodist preachers was significant. Pilmore recorded in his journal that at a conference of preachers Boardman "preached a most excellent sermon on the important work of the Gospel Ministry." Boardman impressed on the new preachers the importance of their work, the essentials of Christian doctrine, the need for disciplined living, and the wisdom of Methodist polity.

However, in the view of Wesley and Asbury, Boardman and Pilmore were not entirely consistent in holding to his instructions. The two did itinerate, but mostly by exchanging
between New York and Philadelphia. When Francis Asbury came to America in 1771 he became distressed because Boardman and Pilmore did not, in Asbury’s view, itinerate sufficiently beyond these two cities. Asbury acknowledged that Boardman was “weak in body,” nevertheless, Asbury complained that he did not more aggressively pioneer in new areas. However, Boardman and Pilmore believed that their demanding work in New York and Philadelphia prevented them from enlarging their responsibilities in a wider itinerary. Pilmore wrote, “Brother Boardman and I are chiefly confined to the cities, and cannot at present go much into the country, as we have enough for two preachers in each place, and if two of our brethren would come over from England I believe it would be attended with a great blessing, for then we could visit the places adjacent to the cities.” Even so, as stated above, they did seek to do some pioneer work in surrounding areas. The two missionaries engaged in some field preaching, with attracted crowds.

Boardman reported some successes in Maryland.

Asbury and Wesley, however, pressed Boardman and Pilmore to engage in a wider itinerary for the purpose of continually establishing new societies. Asbury wrote in his journal, “I remain in new York, though unsatisfied with our [himself and Boardman] being both in town together. I have not yet the thing which I seek—a circulation of preachers, to avoid partiality and popularity…. At present I am dissatisfied. I judge we are to be shut up in the cities this winter. My brethren seem unwilling to leave the cities, but I think I will show them the way.” Thus, Asbury and Boardman had an honest disagreement concerning the amount of itinerancy, which was appropriate.

Also, Asbury and Wesley disapproved of Boardman’s and Pilmore’s leniency toward Robert Strawbridge, who, lacking ordination, administered holy communion. Asbury recorded in his journal,

> Will the people be contented without our administering the sacrament?...
> Strawbridge pleaded much for the ordinances; and so did the people who appeared to be much biased by him. I told them I would not agree to it at that time, and insisted on our abiding by our rules. But Mr. Boardman had given them their way at the quarterly meeting held here before, and I was obliged to connive at some things for the sake of peace.

Boardman and Pilmore apparently concluded that Strawbridge’s remote location and the people’s lack of access to an Anglican church required him to offer the sacraments to those he served. For Strawbridge’s part, he believed that providing sacraments for the people superseded Mr. Wesley’s rule not to administer them. Although appreciative of Boardman’s and Pilmore’s American ministries, John Wesley believed they bent his rules. Wesley wrote Thomas Rankin (who in 1773 came to America as Wesley’s “assistant” to superintend the American Methodists), “There has been good, much good done in America, and would have been abundantly more had brother Boardman and Pilmore continued genuine Methodists both in doctrine and discipline.” Later (1784), Wesley ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey and sent them, with Thomas Coke, to America. By then, the time had come for ordaining the American Methodist preachers so that they could administer the sacraments to the fast-growing Methodist movement.
Looking back on those times, Wesley’s and Asbury’s criticisms seem punctilious, given the context of Boardman’s, Pilmore’s, and Strawbridge’s labors.

We must not make too much of the differences in approaches to ministry that existed between Wesley and Asbury, on the one hand, and Boardman and Pilmore, on the other hand. Wesley held the two missionaries in great esteem, as did Asbury. In 1771 Wesley wrote Pilmore, “There are some of our friends here who bitterly condemn both you and Richard Boardman…. I asked theml, ‘Where are the persons I can confide in, for disinterested men, men of a single eye, if Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoore are not such?’…. O beware of every degree of sloth or indolence! Be good soldiers of Jesus Christ.”

Boardman sometimes evidenced a degree of self-pity. He complained about his health and the slowness of his friends to write him. In a letter to Captain Samuel Parker, dated January 19, 1782, he moaned, “I thought my old and very much esteemed friends had quite forgot Poor me.” In another letter addressed to “My Dear Sister” (probably Mary Thorne) he opened with the lament, “Time was when you who’d have wrote to your old friend but of lately I have heard nothing of as from you…. Where are you? How do you do? Let me hear from you. How do you all in Phil’ dose Isicl the Dear redeemers dose Isicl Kingdom prosper Isicl among you?” Boardman’s health was not good, he continued to grieve over the loss of his family, and his separation from his friends clearly contributed to his occasional melancholy.

He spoke often of eternity and of heaven.

Boardman had a special ability to encourage others. An example of his ministry of encouragement appears in a letter he wrote, probably to Mary Thorne. The letter is addressed to “My Dear Friend.”

I find it good to plow and sow in hope. The time for gathering in will come. O! my dear friend, did we but see the fullness of blessing laid up for us in Christ Jesus it who’ lwho would make us strong in faith, earnest in prayer, satisfy our objections and supply all our wants: while out this fullness we received grace for grace. Yet a little while and Jesus will call us home. May we get fully ready. Heaven will more than compensate for all the little difficulties and trials we have suffered in this world.

On still another occasion he wrote her,

Expect much, you cannot be disappointed. Do what little you can to bring much glory to God. Forsake yourself, and sometimes your beloved retirement, to stir up yourself and others to go forward. Charge your heart neither to murmur nor repine; but to trust without wavering, to believe without doubting, to be active without fainting.

Boardman’s letters to John Wesley also contained encouraging strains. For example, he wrote,

We do not, dear sir, forget to pray for you that God would lengthen out your days;
nor can we help praying that you may see America before you die. Perhaps I have promised myself too much, when I have thought of this. Lord, not my will, but thine be done! I am, dear and Rev. Sir, Your affectionate Son in the Gospel. R. Boardman."

Uniformly, contemporary witnesses judged that Boardman did much to encourage and improve those who knew him.

From the start of their ministries in America, Boardman and Pilmore won, and kept, the people’s loyalty. Shortly before the two returned to England, Pilmore recorded in his journal, “How wonderful it is that the people are as eager for hearing Mr. Boardman and me as they were the first day we arrived in America! Blessed be God who has kept us by his gracious power so that we have not done any thing to hinder our usefulness in this Country, or make the people wish to have us removed.”

When Boardman and Pilmore came to America, there was only one Methodist circuit in New York. The British Conference Minutes of 1770 referred for the first time to America, designating it as “Circuit No. 50.” When Boardman and Pilmore returned to England, they had drawn together into the Methodist connection the scattered Methodist societies on these shores, setting the stage for an era of rapid growth. Historian John Atkinson wrote, concerning Boardman and Pilmore,

That two preachers of such zeal, diligence, and devotion; of such intellectual force and equipment; of such pulpit eloquence and power; of such promptness, energy, and skill in action and administration should have appeared so opportunely on the new field of Methodism in America was visibly providential. They cleared a path for its march to its vast continental conquests. . . . By their luminous and unctuous gospel preaching, and their faithful and wise pastoral supervision the embryonic Methodist Church in America was much invigorated and fortified. . . . The fair Wesleyan tree, whose early growth they fostered and guided and which has attained to proportions so vast and is so prolific of fruit, became well rooted in America before . . . others came to share their toils.”

Richard Boardman was not born in America, and he did not die in America. His tenure here was relatively short (October 21, 1769 to January 2, 1774). Still, he ranks among those significant British benefactors whose lives and labors contributed much to American Methodism. Through his example of selfless service, anointed preaching, diligent pastoral oversight, and passion for the kingdom of God, Richard Boardman helped establish and shape an infant Methodism in America, not yet a nation. He wrote no books, founded no college, gained no advanced academic degrees, established no enduring institutions. Yet, as John Wesley’s first superintendent in America, Richard Boardman’s steady hand and faithful service gave both direction and inspiration to those early American Methodists who would in less than fifty years become a major religious and cultural force in the new nation.

NOTES
2. John Atkinson, The Beginnings of the Wesleyan Movement in America and the Establishment
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10. Robert Williams (c. 1745-1775) sought permission from John Wesley to go to America. However, Wesley was reluctant to allow him to go, because Wesley regarded Williams as not having a sufficiently teachable spirit and because Williams was critical of the Anglican clergy. At last, Wesley agreed to allow Williams to go to America at Williams’ own expense and under the stipulation that Williams become subordinate to the missionaries Wesley was yet to send. Williams arrived in America ahead of Boardman and Pilmore in 1769, and he became the apostle of Methodism in Virginia and North Carolina. Asbury said in Williams’ funeral sermon that he had been “a very useful, laborious man, and the Lord gave him many seals to his ministry. Perhaps no one in America has been an instrument of awakening so many souls, as God has awakened by him.”


12. *Form of Discipline For The Ministers, Preachers, and Members Of The Methodist Episcopal Church in America*, 1787, p. 4.


28. Ibid.
29. Pilmore’s *Journal* (March 27, 1770), p. 43.
44. Pilmore’s *Journal* (Sunday, December 12, 1773), pp. 230-31.
45. Joseph Pilmore took no appointments at the British Methodist conferences of 1774 and 1775. From 1776 to 1784 he served Methodist circuits in London, Norwich, Edinburgh, Dublin, Nottingham, and York. Following the British Methodist Conference of 1784 Pilmore parted company with John Wesley and withdrew from the Methodist ministry. He returned to America, received ordination in the American Protestant Episcopal Church, and served Episcopal congregations in this country until his retirement in 1821.
46. Recording the burial in the parish register, an Anglican priest misspelled Boardman’s name—Bowman.
47. Charles Wesley composed the following epitaph for Boardman, although for uncertain reasons it was not used. ‘With zeal for God, with love of souls inspired,/ Nor awed by dangers, nor by labours tired/ Boardman in distant worlds proclaimed the word/ To multitudes, and turned them to his Lord./ But soon the bloody waste of war he mourns,/ And, loyal, from rebellion’s seat returns./ Nor yet at home, on eagle’s pinions flies,/ And in a moment soars to paradise.”
49. Frank Bateman Stanger, “A Giant Leap for Methodism,” *The Historic Trail*, Yearbook of the Historical Society of the Southern New Jersey Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church,
This letter is in the archives of St. George’s United Methodist Church, Philadelphia. I am indebted to the archivist, Brian McCloskey for making it available to me. Boardman wrote the letter January 19, 1782, from Limerick, Ireland, to Captain Samuel Parker. Apparently the letter was used in 1896 by John Atkinson, who quoted a part of it (The Beginnings of the Wesleyan Movement in America, p. 165).

57. Wesley’s Letters (October 22, 1776), VI, p. 237.
65. Elijah Hedding, A Discourse on the Administration of Discipline (New York: Lane & Sanford, 1842), pp. 41, 53.
68. 1785 Discipline, Q, p. 13, 5.
70. Thomas Rankin of course, temporarily replaced Asbury as superintendent (in 1773). However, this arrangement proved temporary due to Rankin’s brusque manner and his taking England’s side in politics.
72. Matthew Simpson, Cyclopaedia of Methodism, p. 694. However, records show that as early as 1770 the Methodists in New York City secured a “preacher’s house” (J. B. Wakeley, Lost Chapters, pp. 219, 220).
80. Asbury’s *Journal and Letters* (November 19, 21, 1771), I, p. 10. See also January 1, 1772.
83. Asbury’s *Journal and Letters* (December 22, 1772), I, p. 60.
84. Pilmore’s name appears in several other forms—Pilmoor, Pilmoore, Fillmore, Pilmour.
85. John Wesley’s *Letters*, John Telford, ed. (December 4, 1773), VI, p. 57.
87. This letter, addressed to “My Dear Brother,” is in the archives of St. George’s United Methodist Church, Philadelphia. I am indebted to the archivist, Brian McCloskey for making it available to me.
88. This letter is in the archives of St. George’s United Methodist Church, Philadelphia. I am indebted to the archivist, Brian McCloskey for making it available to me.
89. This letter is in the archives of St. George’s United Methodist Church, Philadelphia. I am indebted to the archivist, Brian McCloskey for making it available to me. Boardman did not date this letter, but put at the top “New Work Reply.” In 1896 John Atkinson quoted a part of the letter (*The Beginnings of the Wesleyan Movement in America*, p. 165). Quoted in John Atkinson, *The Beginnings of the Wesleyan Movement in America*, p. 165.
93. The 1770 British Conference Minutes listed four preachers in America—Richard Boardman, Joseph Pilmore, Robert Williams, and John King.