

MINUTES

OF THE

ANNUAL CONFERENCES

OF THE

Methodist Episcopal Church, South,

FOR THE YEAR

1899.

*Methodist Episcopal Church, South.
Conferences.*

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ard Crider, William A. Crocker, Robert N. iam Crooks, John B. Dey, James E. Gates, ster Alexander M. Hall, Richard G. James, sby, William P. Jordan, William A. Laughon, rey, John T. Moore, Joseph H. Riddick, James R. Waggener, Columbus S. Wamsley, J. mot Carson Watson, John P. Woodward. 23.

Ques. 19. What preachers have died during the past year? William R. Smithey, George E. Booker, Sr., William A. Robinson, Dexter W. Reed, John K. Clayton, Robert N. Sledd, John McClelland, James A. Riddick. 8.

WILLIAM ROSSER SMITHEY was born in Amelia county, Va., in 1848, and died in Henrico county, January 17, 1899, of apoplexy. For nearly six years his health had been delicate, but about two years before his death, while pastor of the South Brunswick Circuit, he seemed to grow stronger. Hopes were entertained that his health might be at least partially restored. There were none who could fail to be saddened at the thought of his retirement, far more at that of his death; but little as we thought it, a bright, cheerful, sparkling letter that appeared in the *Richmond Christian Advocate* of January 18 was to be the last we should see from his pen. In two weeks the Conference was shocked and grieved by the news of his sudden death. He fell at his post. It had been the wish, perhaps even the prayer, of his life. Preaching at Shady Grove church, near the Hanover parsonage, on the morning of January 15, 1899, he seemed about as well as usual; but at Greenwood that afternoon he appeared so very unwell that when his sermon had progressed awhile one of the stewards said to him, "Brother Smithey, dismiss the congregation." He did so. He was helped to his buggy, and started to the home of his brother-in-law, Mr. Seay, near the church. Before reaching the house he became unconscious, and thus he remained until the following Tuesday, when he gave up his redeemed spirit into the hands of his Lord. Thus passed to his reward no common man. Few among us have been more gifted by nature than he. Though always of delicate health and feeble frame, he possessed a mind of the finest quality. Denied as he was in early life the advantages of that higher culture of which he was so fully capable, it is hard to guess what he might have been, had God so ordered, when the cutting, grinding, and polishing processes of some great school should have brought out the sparkling light from the facets of his many-sided mind. But there are some minds so strong that they will grow and develop amid the most unfavorable surroundings, and will absorb nourishment from the most unpromising soil. Brother Smithey, while still young, entered the employment of the Richmond and Danville railroad company. In this, telegraphy was

his duty, but never his task. It thoroughly fascinated him. His eager mind pursued the electric spark through earth and sky until it led him up to God, the Creator. Before his conversion he was an eager and enthusiastic student of electricity as a force. In later life, in a lecture of great merit on that subject, prepared and repeatedly delivered by him, he combined a wealth of scientific thought and practical knowledge with a reverence for the Creator that thrilled the thoughtful hearer. But, though capable of grasping any subject, and of pursuing and mastering any line of thought, there was one line of study and work that filled his soul and obtained the mastery of his mind. That work was the preaching of the gospel. Modest even to painfulness, almost awkward in his shrinking self-depreciation, he would appear at the opening of a sermon ill at ease and embarrassed. But as the mind began to take full hold on noble thoughts, he forgot himself, he forgot his congregation, he forgot all awkwardness and embarrassment. His form grew erect, his eye flashed, his voice rounded, his face glowed. Language pure and lofty seemed to flow unbidden to his lips. No one ever heard him and doubted his call to the pulpit or his fitness for expounding the word of God. Of pulpit mannerisms, of tricks of speech, even of laws of elocution, he knew nothing. His sermon was no skillful patchwork of other men's thoughts. His gold had been mined, melted, and minted in his own heart and brain. His private life backed up and emphasized his high estimate of the Christian character. He was the soul of generosity and hospitality; no sordid smirch of covetousness ever soiled his white soul. He never complained of meager salary. If close-fisted church members allowed this noble soul to struggle with sordid cares, they thereby only classed themselves with the church that could seat the prince of scholars and orators on the bench of the tent-maker, when the hard and toil-seamed hands emphasized at once his greatness and their own littleness. His heart was as tender and as guileless as that of a child. His depreciation of his own worth bordered on the extreme. He could see and recognize talent in another, but seemed oblivious of his own manifest superiority. When feeling at all well, he was one of the most genial and companionable of men. His artlessness sometimes led him into laughable blunders, but no one greeted the outcome with greater mirth than he. He was twice married—first in 1872 to Miss Nellie Hubbard, of Buckingham county, and again in 1875 to Miss Nancy Green, of Amelia, who, with five children, survives him, and whose amiable disposition and many excellent qualities smoothed many a rugged spot in his life's

journey. He was a loving and tender husband and father, and he leaves to his children the priceless heritage of a fragrant name. It is no small testimony to his worth, as well as to his fidelity to his friendships, that nearly two-thirds of his ministerial life were spent on two charges. He was twice pastor of South Brunswick, and three times of the Chase City charge. Be it said to the honor of that generous people, that when he was last sent to their charge they loyally and cheerfully accepted him, knowing fully that he was practically disabled; that they provided for his support and furnished him an assistant, all of their own motion. The man and the people were surely well met. Though overshadowed by his pulpit ability, brother Smithey's talents as a writer were by no means mediocre. A series of articles from his pen on the subject of "close communion" showed him a capable logician and a clear and forcible writer. A short piece of his, describing an old church in the county of Brunswick, was really a gem of prose composition, and was so declared by the editor of the *Richmond Christian Advocate*. Of the many gaps made in our ranks during this fatal year of 1899, few are wider and none was filled by a higher, purer type of man, of Christian, or of preacher than that from which fell that sweet-souled comrade of ours, William Rosser Smithey.

The Conference is shrunken in its aggressive force by the death of GEORGE E. BOOKER. He was not a spectacular apostle, making the pulpit a platform for professional piety. The solemn verities of our holy religion were not subjects for garish declamation. As with the old prophets of Jehovah, so with him; the message committed to his tongue was a "burden" on his heart. His care was not for tuneful sentences, in keeping with the dim light of cathedral glass. Nor was there concern for faultless clerical tailorings for his personal adornment. He was too robust of conscience to think scenery and costumes needful to call men to repentance. His eye was single. The business that absorbed his thought and consumed his resources was the rescue of men from the captivity of the devil. The ministry to him was a vocation—a call of God. The notion of social position or place of prominence never came to him. The impending "Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel," and the crown of stars, alone moved him. He would have shunned clerical life as a respectable profession (for he loathed insincerity) had he not the assurance, "I am with you always." It is not a question of doubt. It was an axiom of his character that the mind of an apostle—the high purpose of a Methodist pioneer—should be the loadstone of his career. We may not say that he would have behaved in superior

mood to the apostolic band in the hour of their despair, confusion, and rudderless disarray; for who could have understood the seeming abject submission of their Messiah to a Caiaphas, a Herod, a Pilate? They had seen him master of demons and death, yet it seemed that Satan was victor and the cross could not be avoided. The human mind is unnerved in the presence of a contradiction of its creed—axiomatic truth of conscience. It is safe to say such a one as George E. Booker would have rallied himself on the first dawn of a solution of the dark problem. Such was the firm fiber of his soul. We might have expected that this Virginian would have put on war harness when the ancient commonwealth, his native heath, was menaced by armed invaders. He rose to the rank of a major. Of his prowess, his fortitude and prudence, his comrades testified with pleasure. He succumbed to the hardships of the campaigns in the mountains of Virginia. He recuperated and entered the army again as a private, but soon became the chaplain of his regiment. Whether girt with weapons of war or bearing the emblems of our holy religion, he had honor among the choice ranks of Virginia. In the ministry, his dominant motive was making Christ's men of citizens and edifying the Church of God. The instrument of his success was the gospel, in its purity and pristine power. He did not dilute the stern element of the truth, nor prophesy pleasant things. Men heard an honest utterance as God gave him to find fit words for the divine message. Nor was the wrath of man mingled with the "terrors of the Lord," for he loved the people. He persuaded men by sincere words of sympathy for them in their dread dangers. He did honest work. The new evangelism found no favor with him. He demanded that men should indeed "quit their meanness"—cease to do evil—but he did not value a physical reformation. He was clear and decisive on the doctrine of the new birth—"not of the will of man," but "born of God"—"from above." There must be a radical change, whose agent was the Spirit. Entrance into sonship must come by a divine paternity. And the children must know the Father by the witness of him in their hearts. The Church under his trowel had no "untempered mortar" in its walls. He had superior advantages. He came of a sturdy race—a sound mind and a sound body. He graduated at Randolph-Macon College in 1853. He wove into his mind the spun web of college learning by imparting his knowledge to others while conducting a classical school in Farmville, Va. He was a native of Buckingham county, Va. His parents were William Booker and Nancy D. Agee. In early life he removed to Cumberland county. He became a Christian and a Methodist in 1848. He entered the Vir-

ginia Conference in 1859, serving Lexington, Va., as his first work. He was preaching in Patrick when the civil war began, and gathering the hardy sons of the mountains, he joined the Southern forces. In 1865 he labored on Middlesex. He preached on a number of circuits; also in Suffolk, Elizabeth City, Petersburg (High Street), and Richmond (Union Station). He died in the faith February 13, 1899, at his home in Cumberland, Va. He had ceased active work in the ministry, and waited the summons to reward and rest. He lives yet among us in a son, whose genius, enterprise, and training give hostages and hopes of a brilliant and victorious career in the ministry, worthy of his honored father. So closed the service of Dr. Booker as citizen, soldier, Christian, and minister of God. The commonwealth has been enriched in its moral and social worth by such a son. He was a man of distinct force. He cultivated his strong native parts from youth to age. He was a student, but not a book-worm; not like the white African ant, gnawing a volume into dead dust—rather like the teze fly, feeding on the brain of the stag only. He instructed, subsoiled, and moved beneath the surface. His sermons had richness of information garnered from many sources. He spoke with dignity and engaging words. His presence in the pulpit befitted the place. His virtues had deep root in a noble heart. No mortal ever mentioned him in connection with an unseemly deed. His word was sufficient security for a fact. He never betrayed a friend or misled a foe by simulated friendship. He conferred honor upon the Conference by his behavior on all occasions of moment. He loved us. We lament him.

WILLIAM A. ROBINSON was born in Gloucester county, Va., December 11, 1815; converted in same county, July, 1836. He says, in a sketch of himself: "From the time of my conversion I felt a burning desire to be useful. I was left fatherless when about five years of age. Under God I owe all I am to the pious influence of my mother. For a long time I resisted a call to preach because I felt my incompetency for the work. My natural infirmities have greatly hindered me in the work of the ministry. I marvel that my brethren in the ministry should have borne with me so long. I was licensed to preach April 15, 1851, on Gloucester Circuit; received on trial in the Virginia Conference, 1851; received into full connection and ordained deacon in 1853. Ordained elder in 1855." He was sent to the following charges: Factories' Mission, 1851; York and Warwick, 1852; York, 1853; Goochland, 1854; Sussex Colored Mission, 1855-56; Gloucester Mission in 1857. After this he was made supernumerary and then placed in the superannuated relation, and continued in the