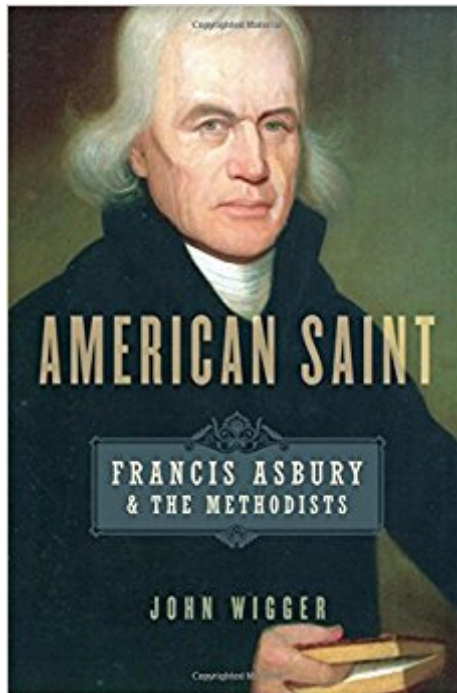




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# **American Saint: Francis Asbury And The Methodists**



## Synopsis

English-born Francis Asbury was one of the most important religious leaders in American history. Asbury single-handedly guided the creation of the American Methodist church, which became the largest Protestant denomination in nineteenth-century America, and laid the foundation of the Holiness and Pentecostal movements that flourish today. In *American Saint*, John Wigger has written the definitive biography of Asbury and, by extension, a revealing interpretation of the early years of the Methodist movement in America. Asbury emerges here as not merely an influential religious leader, but a fascinating character, who lived an extraordinary life. His cultural sensitivity was matched only by his ability to organize. His life of prayer and voluntary poverty were legendary, as was his generosity to the poor. He had a remarkable ability to connect with ordinary people, and he met with thousands of them as he crisscrossed the nation, riding more than one hundred and thirty thousand miles between his arrival in America in 1771 and his death in 1816. Indeed Wigger notes that Asbury was more recognized face-to-face than any other American of his day, including Thomas Jefferson and George Washington.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Wigger has fixed his place as the best Asbury scholar to date and one of the top historians of the American religious scene in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."--Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Methodist History*"Asbury has not lacked for biographies, but Wigger's is definitive and magisterial."--Grant Wacker, *Christian Century*"Francis Asbury had an immense influence in

shaping the early American Republic in that he promoted and oversaw the phenomenal growth of the fledgling Methodist movement at a rate that would soon make it America's largest Protestant denomination. John Wigger provides a definitive and illuminating biography that is to be recommended to all who wish to understand the sort of leadership that makes great religious movements succeed."--George Marsden, author of *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*"Francis Asbury was one of the three or four most important religious leaders in American history, but until now he has lacked a comprehensive biography. John Wigger fills this gap splendidly. But much more than filling a gap, Wigger's rich account of the man who created American Methodism as the marvel of its age also reveals a great deal about the United States in its formative decades. This is a terrific book on a major figure."--Mark A. Noll, author of *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*"Wigger's superbly researched and clearly written biography deservedly rehabilitates one of America's unlikeliest but most significant religious leaders. From his humble beginnings in England, Francis Asbury probably did more to reshape the religious culture of the new Republic than any other individual."--David Hempton, author of *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*

John Wigger is Professor of History at the University of Missouri.

John W, in his book *American Saint*, describes the life and ministry of one of the most important leaders in American United Methodist history; Francis Asbury. The scope of his book is common enough. As a biography of Asbury it covers his life from the time of his birth through his death and even deals with the way some historians have dealt with Asbury after his death. However, John's purpose in writing *American Saint* was not simply to recount the events of Asbury's life but rather to show that in many ways American Methodism is what it is in no small part thanks to the surprising leadership of Asbury. As John points out Asbury wasn't necessarily the greatest preacher or public leader but he had an uncanny ability to lead people one on one that he worked through tireless travel and contact with American preachers."His legacy is not in books and sermons, but in thousands of preachers whose careers he shaped one conversation at a time, and in the tens of thousands of ordinary believers who saw him up close and took him (in however a limited way) as their guide. He was the people's saint, an ordinary person who chose to do extraordinary things" (loc 154). *American Saint* is John's third published book dealing with American Methodism. He published *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America, 1770-1820* in 1998 and then published *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* in 2001. He currently serves as professor of U.S.

Social and Cultural History to 1865 at University of Missouri. As is clear from John's previous publications and his current teaching focus he is well situated to write a History dealing with a Methodist leader in America in the time period of early American Methodism. It can be daunting to write a biography covering the life of a man who lived and lead so many years ago. In the milieu of evidence it can be tempting to write what you want rather than what there is actually proof to support. In fact John speaks of the tendency of authors to do this very thing in his epilogue. While speaking of the work by Herbert Asbury John states, "one has to admire the audacity of an author who, when faced with a lull in his narrative, simply makes something up, the more outrageous the better" (loc 8220). However, one of the greatest strengths of John's book is the great effort he has gone to in order not to simply make things up. His work shows a great deal of research and care to stick closely to the primary sources of Asbury's journal, the journals of other itinerants from the time, and conference journals. This work is immediately visible from the sometimes over whelming number of citations John makes in each chapter to these sources. In fact, in chapter 1 alone John cites primary sources from the time of Asbury's life in 26 out of his 35 citations (loc 8436-8698). Given the number of direct quotes and citations to primary sources that John gives reading *American Saint* leaves the reader with a sense of authority of objectivity into the life of Asbury. A second strength in John's work, that also incidentally gives an air of authenticity, is his willingness to include both positive aspects of and the failures of Asbury's ministry and life. *American Saint* reads like anything but a hagiography of Asbury. In the end Asbury comes out looking like an outstanding leader, who indeed shaped much of American religion through his overwhelming influence on American Methodism through one-on-one relationships with itinerants, but he comes out bruised and bloody. John doesn't shy away from dealing with the fact that Asbury seemed to have a very real problem sharing the authority that was vested in him. This is most clearly seen in two episodes. This is most clear in Asbury's dealings with Thomas Coke and the other bishops of early American Methodism. While by John's writing Coke perhaps did not deserve to be vested with much authority in America, Asbury constantly ignored and insulted Coke rather than dealing with the issue head on right up until Coke's death. However, it wasn't just Coke with whom Asbury showed signs of jealousy over power with. Even when Asbury was to step aside himself, John, writes, "when McKendree read an address to the conference on the state of the church as a way to frame an agenda, Asbury was taken aback, rising to ask, 'I never did business in this way; and why is this new thing introduced?' (Loc 7592). John also shows the reality of Asbury, good and poor, in recounting Asbury's time during the revolutionary war. While yes Asbury

was brave to stay in America while all the other British preachers fled, he remained, however, in a sort of hiding. This is a controversy that even Asbury himself worried would sully his reputation as John records that Asbury wrote in his journal during this period, "if I did not, for a short time, steal after dark, or through the gloom of the woods, as was my wont, from house to house to enforce that truth I (an only child) had left father and mother, and crossed the ocean to proclaim, --I shall not be blamed, I hope, when it is known that my patron, good and respectable Thomas White ... was himself taken into custody by the light-horse patrol: if such things happened to him, what might I expect, a fugitive, and an Englishman?" (Loc 2112).

As with all books, John's work has some weakness. The greatest of these is certainly is at times asynchronous handling of history. John attempts to arrange his chapters primarily thematically and secondarily chronologically. Early in his book this arrangement works well. However, as time passes (for Asbury) and the church and issues become more complex dates are thrown at the reader with alarming regularity that overlap each other. It is the tension between these two organizing principals that seems to cause the problem; that is that it appears that he attempted to give each equal status as a driver of organization. John's work would have benefited from doing one of two things in this regard. He needed to either choose an overarching structure from either theme or chronology and stick more rigidly to it or he needed to offer a fairly extensive timeline in his book to help keep dates and peoples straight in the readers mind.

The second great weakness of American Saint is its treatment of Thomas Coke, which seems much less even handed than that of Asbury. Admittedly this is a biography about Asbury but the person of Thomas Coke seemed to be played as a character with great weakness just to bolster the character of Asbury. Probably the most positive thing that John has to say about Coke is that, "Coke was Asbury's mirror image in many respects. He was well-educated, urbane, and not above entering into political intrigue, as American Methodist would discover" (loc 2828). From there John continually puts Coke forward alternately as a person who makes big promises but then never follows through on them or as a person who worked behind the scenes for his own good. Both of these characteristics come together strikingly in John's writing about the 1796 General Conference. While knowing Asbury's health was failing the conference decided to elect another bishop rather than invest power in Coke who was already a bishop (cf loc 5126-5136).

Despite its shortcomings John's American Saint is an excellent biography on one of the great early leaders of American Methodism. While the book is not well suited to a general audience, any serious student (whether in the form of a literal student or figurative student) of Methodist history would find much to gain from reading this work. Its extensive use of primary sources and fair look at

the life and ministry of Asbury combine to clearly paint a picture of a man who defined religion in early America not through administrative power, though he wielded it, but through relationship and tireless work for the his God and Savior.

I haven't finished this lengthy book yet, but, at halfway through, I can say that it is an enjoyably written history of Francis Asbury and his peers. With its densely-printed pages, this thorough treatment of early Methodism is written for a serious reader. I hope to teach an adult church class on this subject, so I will keep reading to educate myself. But, for my students, I will have to find or create some lighter reading materials.

I bought this book for my Kindle Fire but loved it so much, I wanted my own hardcover copy for my library. It is more than just a report on Francis Asbury, it is the history of the Methodist Church in America. I bought one for myself, one as a gift, and one for our Church Library. Furthermore, this book, interesting within itself, in the history and hardships of a growing movement, prompted me to look for the actual journals of Francis Asbury as they too are the written history of my denomination. What better way of understanding our future then to look at our past... Highly recommend this as a historical page of our history.

This biography answered lots of questions I had about some things they do even now. Both of my parents went to Asbury University in KY, and the name Asbury kept coming up, as you can imagine. This bio brought him to life with no glossy rhetoric or promoting of the author's agenda. Francis Asbury had weaknesses, but man, oh man, his strengths were legendary to his contemporaries as well as us in today's world. Author John Wigger's research is so complete I'm amazed how he cited (and commented) on the vast number of sources at the back of the book-- ideal for scholars wanting to do more research. Wigger more than justifies his book title, "American Saint."

Fully enjoy learning about. France's Asbury's life and trials. We are using this book in our Church small group for discussion.

Very good book. Glad to have a copy. Francis Asbury was very important to our American History. His courage and faithfulness was great.

Excellent read

Very good history and glimpse into his view on Methodism.

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