



REV. WILLIAM P. CORBIT, OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

A portrait of Rev. William Pitman Corbit, which appeared in the April 14, 1860 issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

# “A Great Curiosity:” Rev. William P. Corbit, a Son of St. George’s

Rev. J. Walker Jackson (1893)

*Editor’s Note: the following sketch was published in the Philadelphia Methodist, the conference newspaper, in its issues of May 13 and May 20, 1893, and is reprinted here, with some adaptations, for the first time. It was written by Philadelphia Conference member J. Walker Jackson (1824-1902), who had delivered the reminiscence at a session of the Philadelphia Preachers’ Meeting in April of that year. Its subject, William P. Corbit (1818-1892), was a Philadelphia native, whose family members were active members of St. George’s; Corbit’s own account of his conversion during revival services there follows Jackson’s profile.*

My memory of Rev. William P. Corbit reaches back about 55 years, when he was a young man about 20, and I a boy of 14. He had an elder brother, the Rev. Israel Sanders Corbit, who died at 39 years of age, and lies buried in the graveyard at Mt. Holly. Sanders was a little over a year older than William, but did not enter the ministry until two or three years later. They resembled each other, not strikingly so, but sufficient to make it noticeable. When seen separately the one reminded you of the other. They were both tall men, a little over six feet in height, of good build, and had similar complexions, Israel being a shade or two lighter. But in manner, in disposition in character, they were very dissimilar.

Israel was a quiet, orderly well-behaved gentleman. He was a clerk or salesman in the saddlery hardware store of Jacob Carrigan, a well-known Methodist of that day. He had literary tastes and wrote a little for the old *Saturday Evening Post* and for a Methodist newspaper, the *Repository*. He was studious, self-improving, belonged to several literary and debating societies, of which there were at that time quite a number

in this city. And they served the purpose then of a sort of University Extension. While these societies were not under the auspices of any of the churches, their membership consisted of members of all the churches and of no churches.

The great debate between the Rev. John J. Breckinridge, of the Presbyterian Church, and the Rev. John Hughes, of the Roman Catholic Church, was brought about through the instrumentality of one of these societies in this way. The young men composing it, some of whom were Catholics, were debating the question, "Is the Roman Catholic religion inimical to civil or religious liberty?" The debates being opened to the public attracted large audiences, when one evening at a business meeting one of these gentlemen was proposed for membership, and being elected, appeared at the next public meeting. The other side, then, upon the ground of fair play, demanded that they should be represented by one of equal reputation and ability, and arrangements were soon effected for the oral discussion that was afterward published in book form and was regarded with great interest by the public of both parties.<sup>1</sup>

A number of these societies were composed almost entirely of Methodists. The Wilbur Fisk Society, the most prominent of them all, I think, was made up largely of members of St. George's Church. Israel Corbit was for a considerable time its president, and I know that we were all proud of him as presiding officer, especially on the occasion of our public debates. These were held once a month, and were largely attended by our parents, sweethearts and other friends. Between Israel Corbit and myself, although I was so much younger than he, there grew up a very warm friendship. He was gentle and affectionate, my counselor and friend.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The celebrated public debate took place in the early 1830s, and was published as *Controversy Between the Rev. John Hughes, of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Rev. John Breckinridge, of the Presbyterian Church, Relative to the Existing Differences in the Roman Catholic and Protestant Religions. Originally Published in the "Presbyterian"* (Philadelphia: J. Whetham, 1833). Breckinridge (1797-1841) was a leading Presbyterian divine and later a professor at Princeton Seminary. John Hughes (1797-1864), later became the first Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York.

<sup>2</sup>Rev. Israel Sanders Corbit (1817-1855) was converted at the same revival as his brother, and joined the New Jersey Conference in 1844. Under his leadership new Methodist churches were built in Princeton and Camden. His last appointment was to Bordentown, New Jersey, where he died after an illness contracted during open air preaching services he established for the canal boatmen along the Delaware River. See *The New Jersey Conference Memorial* (Philadelphia: Perkinpine and Higgins, 1865), 295-306. and Matthew Simpson, *Cyclopedia of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Evarts & Peck, 1878), 258.

## EARLY LIFE AND CONVERSION

Through my association with Israel S. Corbit, I gradually became acquainted with William, but there was no great intimacy for a long time. William was noisy, profane, and took to the society of young men of a much rougher mould than his brother. It was in the days of the old Volunteer Fire Department, and there was a large class of young men who, to use the slang phrase of the time, “ran with the macheen.” The hose house and fire engine building were their places of meeting, where they wasted much of their time in polishing the machines and waiting for a fire. Between these companies there existed fearful feuds and animosities, and sometimes the scene of a conflagration would wind up as the theatre of a great fight, in which William Corbit would frequently take a hand. In early manhood he followed the occupation of carter and teamster, and several times drove large Conestoga teams, with six and eight horses in the lead, from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh and back.

Precocious as William P. Corbit seemed in wickedness, my own impression has always been that he was always religiously inclined. He could not keep himself away from the house of God. The hunger of his soul and intellect could only there find the food his religious nature demanded, for William Corbit was of an excellent family. He came of a sober, God-fearing ancestry. His mother and father were members of the church, and he heard the voice of singing and of prayer and of the reading of God’s word daily. In his wildest days, he had an almost superstitious reverence for the Sabbath, and on that day only an actual fire had attractive power sufficient to draw him for the time away from the sanctuary. In times of revival, when services were continued every evening, the Corbits were always at the church – Israel in the body of the house, William in the gallery among the rough element. He was always fond of preaching. The theatre had but little attraction for him, save when some great tragedian in some great tragedy appeared as the star.

One evening – I think it was in 1838 or 1839 – a great revival was in progress under the ministry of the Rev. Charles Pitman at St. George’s.<sup>3</sup> John F. Walker was one of the ushers who seated the congregation, and some very rough-looking and badly behaved young men had gone into the gallery, it was believed, with the intention of

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<sup>3</sup>According the memorial biography of Corbit in the 1893 *New York East Conference Minutes*, the date was in April 1837. This comports well with Charles Pitman’s tenure at St. George’s, which was from 1836 to 1838.



Rev. Charles Pitman (1796-1854) was instrumental in the conversion of William Corbit, who took Pitman as his middle name to honor his mentor. During Rev. Pitman's pastorate at St. George's Church, 1836-1838, the revival he led was said to have resulted in more than 1,200 converts, 750 new members for St. George's, and some 53 young men later entering full-time ministry. Pitman also oversaw the excavation and finishing of St. George's basement story, which also resulted in changes to the front windows and doors that remain to this day; records at St. George's show that in October 1836

none other than William Corbit had been hired to do the digging and hauling of earth.<sup>4</sup> Charles Pitman was immensely popular throughout the Philadelphia region; Pitman, New Jersey is named for him.

disturbing the congregation. Mr. Walker, fearing something of the kind, and noticing Corbit about going up the stairs, called him aside and said to him, "William, there are some young men in the gallery from whom we fear disturbance. Will you permit them to interrupt the worship of God in this house, where your father and your mother stately worship?" Corbit answered with his usual extravagance of speech that he would cut their throats, which, as a matter of course, was intended to be figurative, and went up and took his accustomed seat among them. He gave more than his ordinary attention to the sermon and other religious exercises, and as occasionally some indication of a latent purpose of evil was manifested by his associates, drew down his brows and set his massive jaws, and with flashing eyes indicated that he was (for that evening at least, and in that side gallery) the chairman of the law and order committee, and that he meant to enforce its rules.

<sup>4</sup>Francis Tees, *The Ancient Landmark of Methodism, or Historic St. George's* (Philadelphia: Message Publishing, 1941), 156, 160.

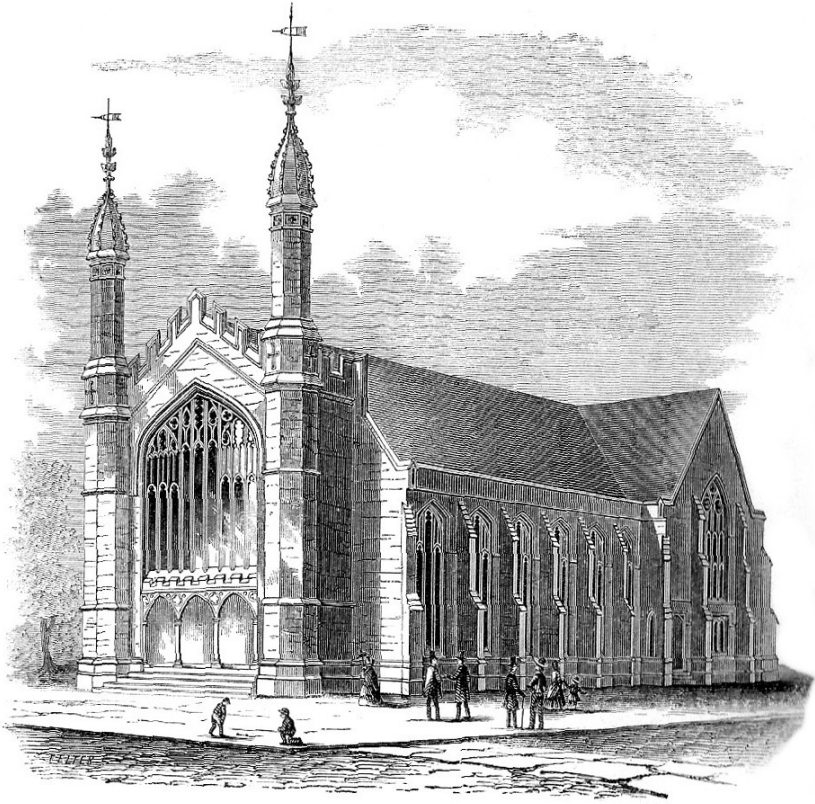
A few evenings afterward, he was in the body of the house and accepted the invitation to the altar, and there, after some days, he accepted Christ as his Savior. The night after he was converted he took his place inside the altar railing, and forthwith embraced every opportunity given him for the exercise of his gifts in song and prayer and exhortation. I think he had been converted about two years when Charles Pitman was transferred to the New Jersey Conference and stationed at Trenton, where Corbit followed him, and staying at this house and studying under the direction of that great pulpit orator, made what preparation he had for the life work he had chosen. At the close of that year he was recommended and received into the New Jersey Conference, and stationed as junior preacher under Bramwell Andrews on the old Freehold Circuit. That was a year of great success. They reported at conference a thousand conversions. Mr. Corbit was recognized at once as a great revivalist, and fairly started on his extraordinary career.

#### A PROMINENT PREACHER

For over a quarter of a century Mr. Corbit filled our best appointments in the largest cities on this continent, and everywhere that he preached the churches were thronged to their utmost capacity. In Newark, New Jersey, he was pastor in his early ministry of the three then leading churches. After some years of absence, he was returned to that city, and under his pastorate Broad Street, or St. Paul's, our finest church property in that city, was built and dedicated by Bishop Janes, Bishop Simpson, and Bishop Pierce of the Southern Methodist Church.<sup>5</sup> And when he was an old man, and decay had set in, and he was without an appointment from the conference, in the middle of the heated term of one summer, he preached there for six successive Sundays to congregations as large as one of the largest churches could contain – and

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<sup>5</sup>Corbit was appointed to Broad Street Church in 1853, the year of its founding, and under his leadership efforts began to erect a massive building seating nearly 1300, which was completed and dedicated in 1856. Described as one of the finest church structures in the country, its name was changed to St. Paul's in 1865, and for 60 years it was a flagship Methodist congregation in the state. In 1921, when membership was over 3,000, a new church building was erected. Today, St. Paul's remains an active United Methodist Church and is a Latino congregation, English-language services having ceased in 1973. See Simpson, 643-644; Vernon Boyce Hampton, *Newark Conference Centennial History* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1952), 541; and phone conversation with Robert Steelman, Greater New Jersey Conference historian, December 19, 2008.



Newark, New Jersey's Broad Street (later St. Paul's) Methodist Episcopal Church, built under Corbit's leadership in the 1850s.

the penny collections, as they used to be called, ranged from forty to fifty dollars at each gathering. He measured his own success, and the success of anybody else, by the standards of the collections and of the convictions and conversions.

Out West, where he went once on a visit with Bishop Janes and preached on conference Sundays, ministers hearing him at one conference followed him to another, often a distance of many miles. In New York, in Baltimore, in London's Old City Road Chapel and in some churches in Yorkshire, he met with the same success. What was the secret of it all? His preparation for public life in any profession was exceedingly limited. He had no education, comparatively. He could read and write when he began to preach, but little more. He had no habits of

study worthy of imitation. Of books, outside of sermons and standard works of Methodist theology, and miscellaneous books that he thought would help him, he knew but little. Now how did he, with such scant endowment, beginning so early and with no training, without much self-education, accomplish such marvelous success?

He began with a splendid endowment of constitutional vitality. To those of you who ever saw and heard him twenty-five, thirty or forty years ago, his appearance was most impressive. His eyes were hazel, large, dark, his nose long and prominent, mouth firm and stern. He was a man of moods that were at once manifested by his wonderful facial expression. Perhaps it will be better that I should convey my thoughts in pictures.

In the fall of 1859, I was a member of the Indiana Conference. Bishop Janes, who presided over that conference, in anticipation of my transfer to the Philadelphia Conference, had given me a merely nominal appointment. Corbit, then stationed at Green Street, New York, hearing of my position, wrote requesting me to come to New York to assist him in a protracted meeting that he would commence on watch night. Newton Heston was to assist him the first week. I reached New York on a Friday night, and was cordially welcomed by Corbit at his home. He was to preach on Sunday morning, and I was to begin preaching for a few weeks on Sunday night. On Saturday night, he retired early to his study and remained there long after I had gone to rest. Sunday morning he rose early and was in his study until breakfast time. At breakfast he said but little, and went again to his study, where he remained until within a few moments of the hour of service. While he was in that study Saturday night and Sabbath morning, that house was as still as the watchfulness of Mrs. Corbit could keep it. It was her province, as I soon found out, to maintain this quiet.<sup>6</sup>

When he and I started for the church, next door, we pushed our way through a crowd of people to find the audience room – one of the largest at that time I had ever seen – crowded. The ushers were placing chairs in the aisles and around the pulpit to seat those who were patiently waiting, and after this had been done, there were many who remained standing from the beginning to the end of the service. It was

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<sup>6</sup>Corbit had married, in 1844, the former Caroline Hill of Flemington, New Jersey, with whom he had nine children. She died in 1866, and Corbit remarried the next year to Emma Case of New York who, along with the three children he had by her, survived him. *New York East Conference Minutes* (1893), 93.



very easy to notice that there were many strangers in the crowd, for I could hear one whispering to another, "That is he."

Corbit looked neither to the right nor to the left as he walked up the side aisle, and ascended the pulpit. After a few moments in prayer he arose, announced his hymn and then prayed – and such a prayer! Solemn, reverent at the beginning, with outbursts of praise in Bible phrase that met with recognition and response. His second hymn, "Oh, How Happy Are They," was the finest read of any hymn I ever heard in or out of a pulpit. The reading answered the question of Philip to the eunuch, "Understandest thou what thou readest?"<sup>7</sup> Not with the "How can I, except someone guide me?" but with the "I need no man to guide me! Here my path is luminous with experiences of this joy." How low was his tone! How clear! How exultant!

His reading of the Scripture was as astonishing to me as that of the hymn. He interjected no comment, but his accent or emphasis was delightfully suggestive. His text was, "Whom having not seen we love, in whom believing we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory,"<sup>8</sup> his theme, the joy of the Christian. I shall not attempt to describe the sermon, nor the inimitable manner in which it was delivered. I think he had preached about thirty or thirty-five minutes, when, having suitably introduced, by its history, a hymn that he intended quoting, without clearing his throat or doing anything that would break the charm, he began to sing,

A voice from the spirit land,  
A voice from the silent tomb,  
Entreats with sweet command,  
Brother come home, etc.

When the singing ended, I know not; his voice had glided into tender exhortation and pleading. Voices from the heavenly home, voices of the dead, were pleading with the congregation, through his voice, to come to God, to give their hearts to Christ, to taste the joys of pardoned sin. Through my own tears I looked on at least a thousand faces wet with tears. Oh, brothers, Green Street Church that morning seemed a *Bochim*<sup>9</sup> drenched with tears rained thickly from full and thirsting

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<sup>7</sup>Acts 8:30.

<sup>8</sup>1 Peter 1:8.

<sup>9</sup>A reference to Judges 2:1-5, where the Israelites wept after a reproof from the Lord, naming the place *Bochim*, or "weeping."

hearts. I could scarcely read the hymn that he had selected, or give utterance to the few words of prayer that ought to follow every sermon, my heart so choked up the gateway of my voice.

As soon as he reached home he retired to his study and changed his undergarments, that were not merely damp, but wet with sweat, and after dinner he slept; he seemed perfectly exhausted. That was the result in those days of every effort he made, and he was then at the height of his reputation.

In the following spring, he made his first trip to Europe. An Englishman living in New York, a man of wealth connected in some way with a steamship company – and of Methodist parentage living somewhere in Yorkshire, England – wrote such glowing accounts home of his wonderful preaching as to secure Corbit an invitation to preach the dedication sermon of a chapel at Kithley. He accepted the invitation, and connected with it a purpose to travel for two or three months over the Continent. The week of his departure *Harper's Weekly* gave up its entire first page to a wood-cut, and a good likeness it was, with a short biography on another page.<sup>10</sup>

The second Sunday after his arrival in London, he preached in City Road Chapel to one of its ordinary congregations, and it was announced for the next Sabbath that he would preach a charity or some other occasional sermon. The Sunday came, and long before the hour the church was filled to overflowing. His first sermon had been advertisement sufficient to secure this result. The second sermon made him famous. Most of the newspapers gave him notice, and even the *London Times* was eulogistic of this "backwoods" preacher.

Backwoods preacher! What an epitaph for a preacher who had won his great renown as a preacher in the greatest city of the New World!

After my transfer to the Philadelphia Conference in the spring of 1859, we helped each other a great deal. I preached for him in Jersey City, in New York, at Seventeenth Street, in Baltimore. He preached for me in old Nazareth, in Green Street, in St. Paul's, in Ebenezer, and I had no trouble to secure him large congregations on weekday nights, and on the Sundays he would draw as large or larger congregations than anybody whom I could get to fill my pulpit.

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<sup>10</sup>The portrait and biographical sketch of Corbit, along with an image of him preaching in his New York church, actually appeared on an interior page of the April 14, 1860 issue of *Harper's Weekly*. Both images have been reproduced for this article.

## CORBIT AS A PREACHER

He preached the gospel. He knew nothing about higher criticism, lower criticism, about the evolution of man, or the evolution of the gospel. But he knew in whom he believed, and he knew well what he believed concerning him, and he could tell it in the pulpit or out of the pulpit with pathos and energy unexampled. Indeed, to me he seemed to tell it out of the pulpit, conversing with an unbeliever, with greater effect than when preaching. He preached upon the great themes: sin, death, judgment, heaven and hell, the divinity of Christ, the atonement, justification by faith, sanctification, the witness of the Spirit; and he never left any one listening to him in doubt as to where he stood. "Doubt is damnation to the speaker as well as to the hearer. You cannot convince if you are not convinced yourself," he used frequently to say.

He knew the catechism by heart, and he could repeat it, and he had it so thoroughly inwardly digested that it was health to his naval and marrow to his bones. He read the Bible every day of his life, regularly and irregularly, and he was so familiar with it that he unconsciously quoted it. He studied the books prescribed for the conference studies.

He had a wonderful memory for an untrained man, and had stored away in it the finest passages of the best sermons in the English language. He read and committed a great deal of poetry to memory: Pollock's "Course of Time," Young's "Night Thoughts," and early in his ministry he had come across Robert Montgomery's poems – not the Montgomery of the Hymn Book, the Montgomery of Sheffield – but the Montgomery who was for a while a very popular preacher in London, with fashionable ladies of the evangelical type, and who wrote long poems on "The Omnipresence of the Deity," "Luther, the Solitary Monk Who Shook the World," "Satan, or Intellect Without God" – poems that reached seventeen and eighteen editions, and that Macaulay condescended to criticize in the *Edinburgh Review* so savagely as to kill either the author or the books, or both.<sup>11</sup> The style of this poet was very spread eagle, and Montgomery was very orthodox, and both these qualities commended him to my friend.

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<sup>11</sup>Poet and Anglican priest Robert Montgomery (1807-1855) wrote a number of epic poems that were immensely popular, but harshly criticized by essayist, poet and Parliamentarian Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859) in the April 1830 edition of the *Edinburgh Review*. David Patrick, *Chambers' Cyclopaedia of English Literature* (London: W & R Chambers, 1903), 238-239.

But Corbit read the Psalms and the prophecies, and that wonderful repository of sacred poems, the *Methodist Hymn Book*, and for this we may well say, "May all thy sins of taste be forgiven thee." And if Montgomery's seventeen or eighteen courses of roasted grass were taken for good venison by the religious public across the water, who could wonder at this untrained genius smacking his lips over a mouthful now and then, and furnishing his congregation occasionally with a little of it as a side dish when he apostrophizes "the spirits of the just" as "immortal beacons" and describes their employments in another world as "bathing in light," "hearing fiery streams flow" and "riding on living cards of lightning."



Rev. J. Walker Jackson

I have been asked whether he did not largely appropriate the authors he read. Early in his ministry I think he quoted a good deal; but as he grew older he grew more original, and so skillful was he in the construction of his discourses that when he was at his best it was very hard to tell, like his singing in the pulpit, where the quotation began and where it ended. I am reminded of an incident. During the war I was invited to make one of the speeches on a great occasion at the Academy of Music. There were several speakers beside myself, among the rest the Hon. Benjamin Harrison Brewster, afterward Attorney General of the United States. Going out of the building, Mr. Brewster joined me, and we walked down Walnut Street together. After we had duly complimented each other on our speeches, we glided into friendly and admiring criticism of the other speakers. He said, in alluding to one of them, "What a wonderful fellow he is! His mind is like an intellectual ragbag. He gives you a piece of cloth, of gold, of finest velvet, of richest silk, fastened together by all sorts of fustian."<sup>12</sup> Corbit's connecting

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<sup>12</sup>Fustian is a term used for heavy woven fabrics, but also as a metaphor for pompous or pretentious language.

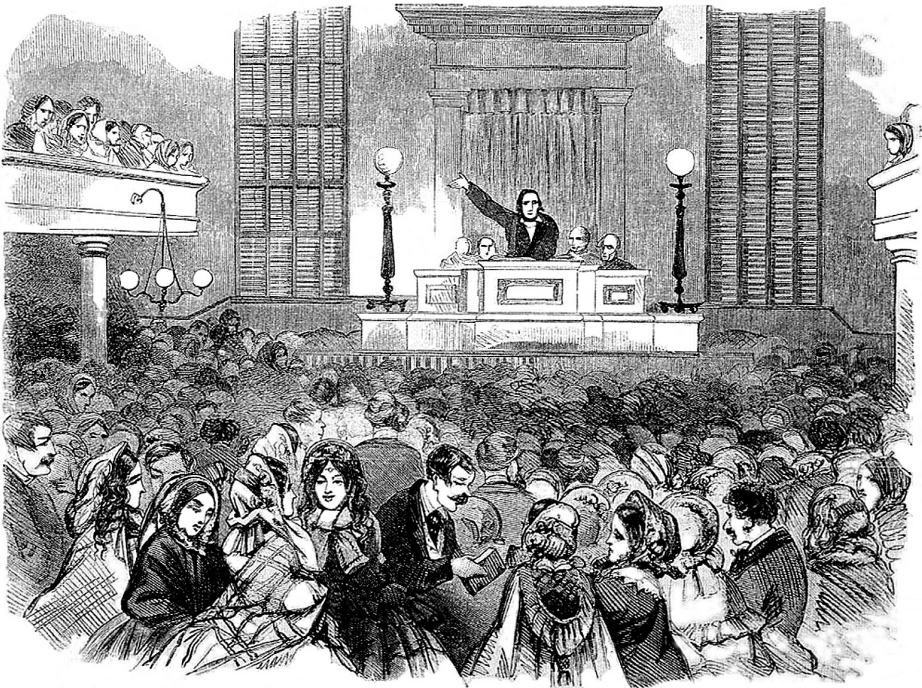
passages were not fustian – they were often as eloquent as his best selected passages.

His delivery of a discourse was something that excited wonder and delight. He went into the pulpit seemingly unconscious of anything around him. If you spoke to him he would forget in an instant what you said. He always, or at least whenever I heard him, conducted the preparatory services himself, reading his hymns, the Scripture and praying. And the prayer led to the sermon. It drew your thoughts away from the things of time and sense, and fixed them on heavenly things, and left the hearts of the hearers warmed with holy fire. He loved, as he expressed it, “to whet his own scythe.” He had one of the best voices for public speaking I ever heard.

He spoke clearly, distinctly, without effort, and was heard at the remotest corner of any building in which he spoke. Its tones moaned like the sighing of the winds in autumn, or like the rippling of waters, or like the crash of the thunderbolt. In tender entreaty he wept as if his head were waters and his eyes a fountain of tears. Of his gesticulation, Dr. Buckley has said that his arms were thrust out like swords, swung like scythes, or curved like sickles. Corbit always appeared well in the pulpit. He dressed well and always in black. He was well-dressed in that, like a well-dressed woman, there was nothing in his dress to attract attention.

I have given you my estimate of his preaching, and I know that I have not overestimated his strange power over an audience. He rose to his high eminence, and drew around him his large audiences, by no sensational tricks. He announced no themes. He knew that he was not a scholar, and he made no pretence to be one. He never used a Latin quotation or the back end of Webster’s dictionary. Dr. Talmage has spoken in the highest terms of his preaching. Mr. Beecher heard him once, of a weekday night, with admiration.

The Rev. Henry D. Moore, a young preacher in Philadelphia, who went east to Maine and achieved a great reputation among the Congregationalists there – and afterward preached in the Opera House at Cincinnati to congregations too large for the church that had called him, until failing health compelled his retirement from the pulpit – came one Sunday evening, when on a visit to this city, to the Green Street Church, during my pastorate there, to hear Corbit. On that evening he was at his best, loving and tender. Mr. Moore said to me the next morning, “I nearly cried my eyes out while listening to Corbit last night. I cried frequently during the night at the remembrance of some things that he said.” Chief Justice Zane of Utah, an uncle of the Rev. William



REV. WILLIAM P. CORBIT PREACHING TO “THIEVES AND HARLOTS” IN THE GREENE STREET METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, ON APRIL 1, 1860.

An engraving of Corbit preaching in the Green Street ME Church,  
New York, from the April 14, 1860 issue of *Harper’s Weekly*.

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M. Zane of the New Jersey Conference, and of Andrew Zane, Esq., of this city, said to me when we were conversing on the past (as all old men will whose lives have been happy), turning the conversation on old Methodist preachers, “Forty years ago I heard William Corbit preach at a camp meeting. The same day another great preacher occupied the stand, and preached, as I thought, grandly; but it was tame in comparison with Corbit’s magnificent sermon, with its magnificent delivery.”

His picturesque extravagances of expression were not so marked in the pulpit as in his ordinary conversation, when he delighted in the effect some outlandish expression would produce upon some timid, gentle listener.

## A REMARKABLE MINISTRY

His success was remarkable. Ten thousand souls, it was said at his funeral, were converted under his preaching. He kept a diary, and every day during his active ministry made some record. At one time it did him good service, for it enabled him to prove a triumphant alibi when a slanderous allegation was made against him in a newspaper, the editor of which made ample retraction in a conspicuous editorial, and was willing to make any reparation that Corbit demanded. I have no doubt that this diary would furnish sufficient proof to justify the statement as the number of converts. There are many of his converts in the ministry of our own and other churches, and many more where they have welcomed him to everlasting habitations.

But Mr. Corbit's success did not depend alone upon his preaching. He knew well how to conduct all the means of grace of a Methodist Church, to administer the Lord's Supper with dignity and tenderness; to baptize children in such a way as to win the hearts of their mothers; to lead a class by the still waters into the green pastures; to conduct his weekly prayer meetings so as to make them interesting and have them always full. He could sing a hundred or more different tunes, and he always sang tenderly, joyfully.

As to his protracted meetings, he made the most thorough preparation for them, selected the ministers whom he chose to help him a good while in advance, had them to preach in the order in which he thought they would prove most effective. He gave out his protracted meetings in advance, when they would begin, how long they would last, who would preach, made kindly and extravagant mention of their qualifications, exhorted his people to pray for the meeting, for the ministers, and to make such preparation as to business and other affairs as would enable them to attend all the services. He never had preaching on Monday evenings. Whoever preached for him rested on that evening, while the leaders and exhorters of his church generally would hold services in the lecture room, or meet class. If any of the members desired a preacher to take a meal with them, he would suggest a noon-time dinner, and then he would take the minister home to his own house and shut him up in his room to fill up the time in resting or looking over his sermon, and he insisted on this course being pursued in his own case, whenever he helped a brother. He would – at least in my case – want to know what texts I intended preaching from, and suggest the order in which I had better preach them. He had not lost the old art of

exhortation, and while he insisted on the ministers who preached for him "shocking their own sheaves" (that is, inviting mourners to the altar), if anything in the sermon or in the congregation suggested some word on his part, he would exhort with a power and tenderness that broke and melted many hearts. Death, death, was his great theme for protracted meetings.

He made great preparations for filling his pulpit during his vacations. He had the ministers paid and well paid, and announced them in such ways as to stimulate curiosity to hear. I filled his pulpit on such occasions at Dekalb Avenue and at Fayette Street, Baltimore, in the middle of the summer, and the houses – both morning and evening – were overflowing, frightfully full.

### A GREAT CURIOSITY

From boyhood to manhood we were acquainted, from manhood down to old age we were intimate friends. He was to me always a great curiosity. I wonder what I was to him. We scarcely ever agreed upon any question. He was a dreadful conservative, or rather I would say, he was always radically wrong – on the slavery question, especially; but I think that arose from the attitude of the churches themselves. That was the time when doctors of divinity by the score were ready to prove slavery a divine institution, for negroes as chattels were then worth enormous prices. Southside views of slavery were painted by northern ministers. He embraced such views, and when the change of sentiment was going on in the public mind, he did not notice it until the hour for turning around had about passed, and then he braced himself up on the wrong side and stuck to it out of sheer stubbornness. In politics, the *New York Herald* was his standard, a paper that always read to him as if a Mephistopheles were its editor. His reading of religious newspapers was confined to the great official. I do not believe that during the entire existence of the *Methodist*, the organ of lay delegation, that he ever read a line of it.

He was necessarily narrow. We discussed these and kindred questions for hours together. He would walk the floor, smite his fists together and shout, "Now let me say something," and the something always seemed to me dreadfully illogical, irrelevant, and I had almost said irreverent. On religion, on theology, I dearly loved to hear him talk, and I was always benefited.



I loved him, in spite of all his faults. He was very affectionate. The brother who had died so young, just before his death had said to William, "I want you to be good." And William had that expression painted on the frame of his brother's portrait, which was always hung upon the wall of his parlor in the best light, and I think there was scarce a day when he did not look at that picture and read that admonition. On the wall of his study he had the old silver watch that he carried in his early manhood when a teamster, and he wound it every morning; and as he did it, if any one stood by, he would affirm its great qualities as a good time-keeper in comparison with modern watches.

I have always thought it a great pity that he had not received an early and thorough scholastic training – that, as I used to say to him, he was not college bred. I can see him now, flaring up, opening his eyes to their utmost width, and extending his lower jaw beyond his upper, and shouting, "You would have spoiled the picture." But I still have the same view. Had he gone to school as soon as he was converted, preaching occasionally, but applying himself mainly to study, as he would have done, his mind would have expanded, and he would have sloughed off many things that I believed injured his usefulness and impaired his fame. He needed education. The native vigor of his mind would have responded quickly to culture. The greater the mind, the more need it has for such training as William P. Corbit had not, and which for him could alone be found in the schools.

He has gone. Others have gone before, and still others will follow. Friend after friend of my youth and of my manhood departs. How sweet was their companionship!

And if our fellowship below  
In Jesus be so sweet,  
What heights of rapture shall we know  
When round his throne we meet!

## William Corbit’s Account of the St. George’s Revival of 1837

*Editor’s Note: This recollection of Corbit’s was quoted as part of his memorial biography that appeared in the New York East Conference Minutes (1893), 93-95, as well as in the Christian Advocate (New York) of August 22, 1895. The former cites April 18, 1837 as the date of Corbit’s conversion.*

Wild and reckless as I was, I never knew the time when I was wholly without the fear of God. I went generally to church Sunday mornings to please my mother, and had told my parents that I was going to seek religion. My father, who was somewhat stern and severe, said I would never be converted, that I was one of the reprobates. This declaration pierced my heart like an arrow, but my mother replied, “William will live to preach the Gospel, and you and I will live to hear him.”

On the first Sunday evening of the protracted meeting, I was there, but sat back by the door. [He then speaks of the effect upon him of Mr. Pitman’s sermon, and relates how, night after night, he felt prompted to go forward, each evening sitting nearer and nearer the altar, until Friday evening, when to return to his own words]. Feeling that this was my last chance, I took my seat within six pews of the altar. The sermon that evening was preached by the Rev. Caleb A. Lippincott, from the text, “If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself; but if thou scornest, thou alone shall bear it.”<sup>13</sup> I was now trembling under the most powerful influence of the Holy Ghost. The hymn, “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy,” was sung by hundreds of voices, and when it had reached the chorus, “Turn to the Lord and seek salvation,” scores upon scores rose and pushed their way to the altar.

I put out my foot again to start, and then drew it back, as the altar seemed to be full. But I looked again, [and] in one extreme corner to the left, as I faced the altar, there was a little gate by which the preachers entered the pulpit – it was next to the wall – and I saw there was a space just big enough for me. I thought I could squeeze in, and all at once, with a great effort, I made a bolt for that spot.

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<sup>13</sup>Proverbs 9:12.

I fell on the altar like a log, and began to pray, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

When I had been there about ten minutes (no one speaking to me before this), there came to me Robert Knight, a man with whom I had dealings, and thought the best man in the world. He laid his arm across my back and said, “Brother Corbit” – O! how that word *brother* thrilled me, calling such a sinner as I was “brother” –

“Brother Corbit, do you feel yourself a sinner?”

“I do,” I replied, “or I would never have come here.”

“Do you believe Jesus Christ *died* for sinners?”

“I do, sir.”

“Well, now, if you are a sinner, and you believe that Jesus Christ died for sinners, is he not your Savior?”

“Yes! Yes!” said I, “Glory to God, he is my Savior!”

It seemed to me that at that instant that a ton weight had fallen from each of my shoulders, and that a voice whispered distinctly into my soul, “Thy sins are all pardoned.” I was as happy as a soul could be, to live in the body.

[Speaking of a man whom he hated, he says that no sooner did the Holy Ghost assure him of the forgiveness of his sins than he arose and called for this person that he might be at peace with him, and then remarks:]

Thus I had the experience that is declared by the apostle Paul, “that the Spirit beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.”<sup>14</sup>

I had the witness verified in my own spirit – for all the gall that had been in my heart previous to my conversion toward this man was taken out, and my heart was filled with love toward him and all mankind.

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<sup>14</sup>Romans 8:16.

## A Recollection of William Corbit

By Rev. Thomas O'Hanlon

*Editor's Note: Rev. Dr. Thomas O'Hanlon (1832-1912) was one of the most distinguished ministers of the New Jersey Conference. A Princeton University graduate, he served for more than 30 years as president of the Pennington School, where he is remembered today by a park that bears his name. His recollection of Corbit appeared in the January 21, 1893 issue of the Philadelphia Methodist.*

It was in 1850, while yet a boy, that I first heard Mr. Corbit preach. It was at the dedication of a church not far from Freehold, New Jersey. Dr. Joseph B. Wakely preached in the morning and Mr. Corbit in the afternoon. The preacher of the morning took for his text, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained; what is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that thou visitest him?"<sup>15</sup> The sermon was bright, beautiful, instructive and pleasing; the congregation retired delightfully impressed with the grandeur of the heavens and the love of God to man.

In the afternoon the church was crowded with an audience on the very tip-toe of expectation to hear Mr. Corbit, who had already become famous as an eloquent preacher. He arose and named as his text in an impressive manner, "This is the Christ."<sup>16</sup> His sermon was made up of arguments to prove the supreme divinity of Christ. His arrangement was this: 1) Arguments from earth; 2) Arguments from heaven; 3) Arguments from hell. He at once captured the audience and held them spellbound for nearly two hours, as he summoned as his witnesses, men, angels and devils. He gave wings to his imagination and carried the people with him, till earth and time were forgotten in the overwhelming realization of the spirit world. His description of hell was the most terrible that I have ever heard, and it was so graphic that I lost all knowledge of my surroundings and thought I was at the open gateway of the damned, looking in upon their miserable forms, and listening to the plaintive and hopeless cries of their never-ending agony. When at last

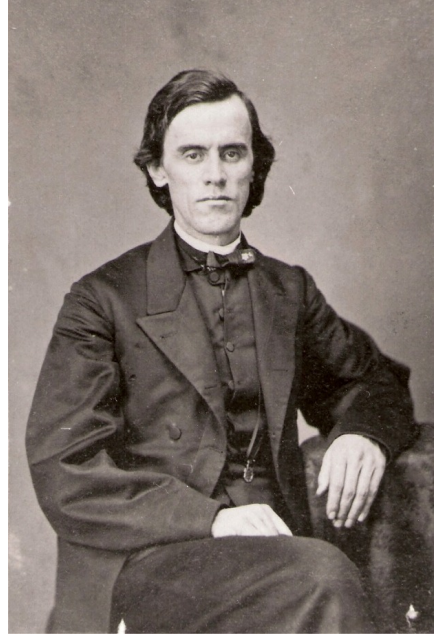
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<sup>15</sup>Psalm 8:3-4.

<sup>16</sup>John 7:41.

the great preacher had passed this awful climax, I gave a sigh of relief, and came back again to consciousness to earth and time, and I devoutly thanked God that it was only a picture and that I was still out of hell.

Mr. Corbit was tall, broad-shouldered, compactly built, of great muscular strength, and very striking in his personal appearance; his hair was long and jet-black, complexion swarthy like an Indian, nose and mouth large, his lips compressed, eyes large, full, black, brilliant and piercing, voice very striking and of great compass and very penetrating. In its tone it was weird, plaintive, and in its climaxes very thrilling. His memory was extraordinary, remarkable both for



Rev. Thomas O'Hanlon

its retentiveness and accuracy. But his greatest facility was his imagination. It was strong, vivid, wild and lofty in its flights. It would traverse the wildest woodlands and desert wastes; it would scale the most giddy heights, and sail out upon the most dangerous seas – seas upheaved by awful cyclones amidst crashing thunder and bewildering lightnings.

William P. Corbit could paint heaven brighter and hell blacker than any preacher I have ever heard, and I have heard Waugh and Janes and Durbin and Simpson and Spurgeon and Beecher and Foster. Mr. Corbit's fame during the first 30 years of his ministry was very great – much greater than during the last 20 years of his life. This was owing to two causes. First, his two great faculties in preaching were his imagination and his memory, and these two faculties are at their best before the age of 50 years; after this period they decline in strength. The other cause is that there is less demand for the declamatory style in preaching and more demand for the conversational style than there was a generation ago.

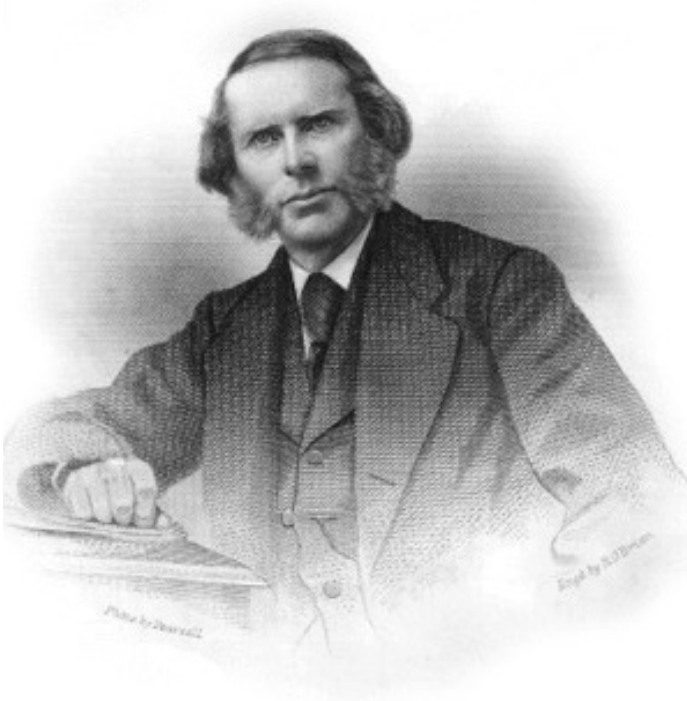
## A Tribute To William P. Corbit

Rev. T. Dewitt Talmage

*Editor's Note: Rev. Thomas Dewitt Talmage (1832-1902) was a prominent nineteenth-century Presbyterian preacher. He was best known as the pastor of the 5,000 seat Brooklyn Tabernacle from 1869 to 1894, which burned down three times and was rebuilt twice during his tenure. He also founded and edited the widely circulated Christian Herald, and authored a number of books. His recollection of William P. Corbit is taken from his posthumously published autobiography, which was expanded by his widow, and entitled, T. Dewitt Talmage As I Knew Him (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1912), 19-20.*

With supreme gratitude... I remember the wonderful impression made upon me, when I was a young man, of the presence of a consecrated human being in the pulpit. It was a Sabbath evening in spring at The Trinity Methodist Church, Jersey City. Rev. William P. Corbit, the pastor of that church, in compliment to my relatives, who attended upon his services, invited me to preach for him. I had only a few months before entered the Gospel ministry, and had come in from my village settlement to occupy a place in the pulpit of the great Methodist orator. In much trepidation on my part, I entered the church with Mr. Corbit, and sat trembling in the corner of the "sacred desk," waiting for the moment to begin the service.

A crowded audience had assembled to hear the pastor of that church preach, and the disappointment I was about to create added to my embarrassment. The service opened, and the time came to offer the prayer before sermon. I turned to Mr. Corbit and said, "I wish you would lead in prayer." He replied, "No! Sharpen your own knife!" The whole occasion was to me memorable for its agitations. But there began an acquaintanceship that became more and more endearing and ardent as the years went by. After he ceased, through the coming on of the infirmities of age, to occupy a pulpit of his own, he frequented my church on the Sabbaths, and our prayer-meetings during the week. He was the most powerful exhorter I ever heard. Whatever might be the intensity of interest in a revival service, he would in a ten minute address augment it. I never heard him deliver a sermon except on two occasions,



Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage

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and those during my boyhood; but they made lasting impressions upon me. I do not remember the texts or the ideas, but they demonstrated the tremendous reality of spiritual and eternal things, and showed possibilities in religious address that I had never known or imagined.

He was so unique in manners, in pulpit oratory, and in the entire type of his nature, that no one will ever be able to describe what he was. Those who saw and heard him the last ten or fifteen years of his decadence can have no idea of his former power as a preacher of the Gospel. There he is, as I first saw him! Eye like a hawk's. Hair long and straight as a Chippewa Indian's. He was not straight as an arrow, for that suggests something too fragile and short, but more like a column – not only straight, but tall and majestic, and capable of holding any weight, and without fatigue or exertion. When he put his foot down, either literally or figuratively, it was down. Vacillation, or fear, or

incertitude, or indecision, were strangers to whom he would never be introduced. When he entered a room you were, to use a New Testament phrase, "exceedingly filled with his company."

He was as affectionate as a woman to those whom he liked, and cold as Greenland to those whose principles were an affront. He was not only a mighty speaker, but a mighty listener. I do not know how any man could speak upon any important theme, standing in his presence, without being set on fire by his alert sympathy.

But he has vanished from mortal sight. What the resurrection will do for him I cannot say. If those who have only ordinary stature and unimpressive physique in this world are at the last to have bodies resplendent and of supernal potency, what will the unusual corporiety of William P. Corbit become? In his case the resurrection will have unusual material to start with. If a sculptor can mould a handsome form out of clay, what can he not put out of Parian marble? If the blast of the trumpet which wakes the dead rouses life-long invalidism and emaciation into athletic celestialism, what will be the transfiguration when the sound of final reanimation touches the ear of those sleeping giants among the trees and fountains of Greenwood?<sup>17</sup>

Good-bye, great and good and splendid soul! Good-bye, till we meet again! I will look around for you as soon as I come, if through the pardoning grace of Christ I am so happy as to reach the place of your destination. Meet me at the gate of the city; or under the tree of life on the bank of the river; or just inside of the door of the House of Many Mansions; or in the hall of the Temple which has no need of stellar or lunar or solar illumination, for "the Lamb is the Light thereof."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Probably a reference to Brooklyn's historic Green Wood Cemetery, where Corbit likely was buried. His funeral had been held in Brooklyn's Hanson Place Methodist Episcopal Church, on December 15, 1892. According to a newspaper account, a testimonial letter from Dr. Talmage was read at Corbit's service. *Christian Advocate* (New York), December 22, 1892.

<sup>18</sup>Revelation 21:23.