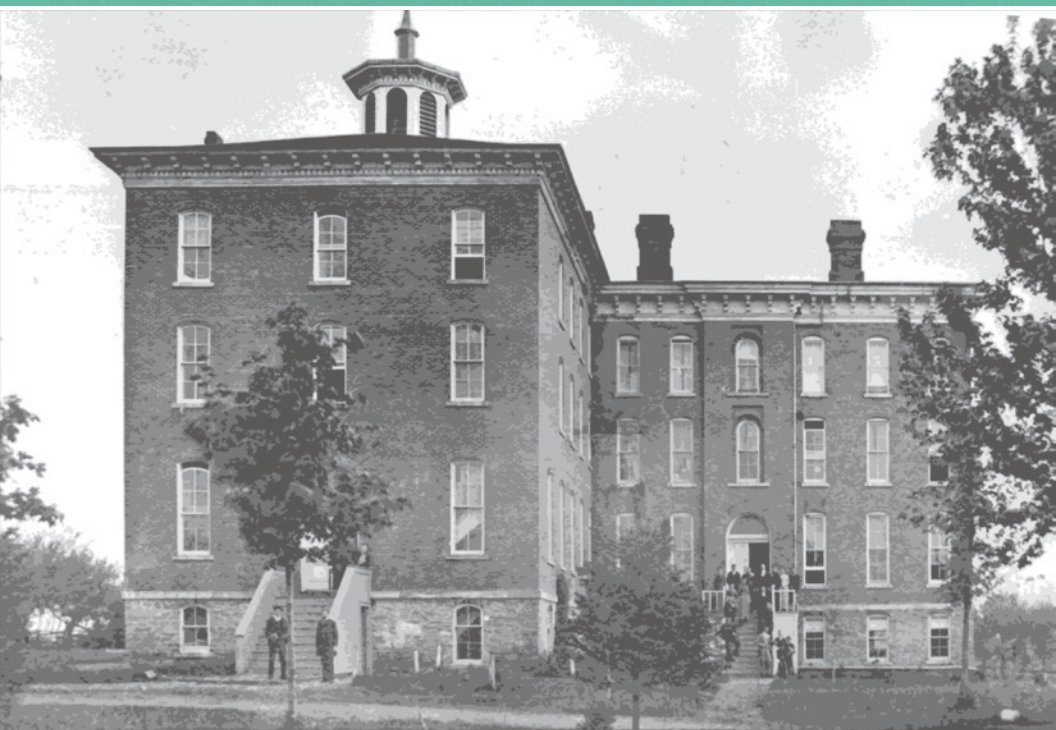


B. T. Roberts and the Founding of Roberts Wesleyan University



HOWARD A. SNYDER

Introduction

The lives of Benjamin Titus Roberts (1823-1893) and Ellen Lois (Stowe) Roberts (1825-1908) explain how Roberts Wesleyan University was born.

Benjamin Roberts was known simply as B. T. Today many people in Free Methodist or Roberts Wesleyan circles simply call him BTR.

B. T. and Ellen Roberts enjoyed a close and loving marriage. As a leader and entrepreneur, his was the more public role. Ellen's quiet witness helped set the tone and deepened the spiritual life of the campus community during the school's early years, when B. T. and Ellen and their children lived right by the campus. For years they had a home where the RWC President's home now stands.

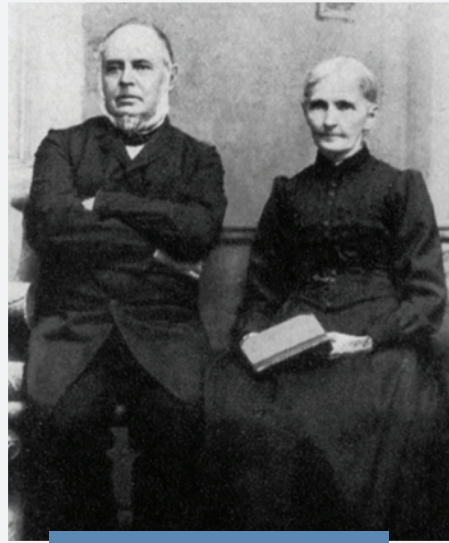


Who were B. T. and Ellen?

B. T. Roberts was the main founder of Roberts Wesleyan University. He was also the principal founder of the Free Methodist denomination, which now reaches around the globe. He was an avid reader, interested broadly in the liberal arts. But his passion was Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God as revealed in Scripture, embodied in the Methodist heritage, and made real in his own experience. Ellen Stowe Roberts fully shared this passion and these interests.

B. T. Roberts was also a social reformer. He sparked the formation of the New York Farmers' Alliance, which became the model for the National Farmers' Alliance that wielded significant political clout for economic justice in the 1880s to 1890s. Roberts also argued vigorously against slavery and encouraged women to fulfill their call to preach.

B. T. and Ellen Roberts lived within the world of the nineteenth-century Methodist movement and the holiness movement which spilled out beyond Methodism to touch many other churches. This places Roberts within the matrix of revivalism, abolitionism, and perfectionism, dynamics which shaped his ministry. Ellen, his partner in marriage and ministry, shared her husband's passion for holiness, the gospel for the poor, and city ministry. Together they sought to live a life of freedom, holiness, and justice that was for *all the people*, and especially the poor. That's why I call them *populists*, using that term in its highest sense: Of and for the people. All people, not just my race or party.



B.T and Ellen Roberts

A Love Story

The history of Roberts Wesleyan begins in a love story.

In 1848, B. T. Roberts was studying at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, a Methodist school. It was summer, just before graduation. B. T. was about to graduate and start pastoring a Methodist church.

He met a lovely young woman, Ellen Stowe, visiting from New York City. B. T. was fascinated, but figured he'd never see her again once he left campus. Ellen wrote in her diary, "I liked the tone of his mind."

The day after graduation, B. T. planned to take a the steamer ship to New York. He arranged first to walk with Ellen, though. The two walked down to Pameacha Grove—a favorite spot for Ellen, though B. T. was unaware.

B. T. climbed on a tree branch and recited "some beautiful lines" of poetry, Ellen wrote. They had "some very pleasant and congenial conversation." The pair continued talking as they walked along a stream.

Soon they said goodbye. Ellen feared she'd ever see him again. To her surprise, he showed up again next morning! He had set off by steamboat in the afternoon, but a dense fog forced the boat back. Here he was again at Ellen's door. He asked Ellen if he could write to her. She said yes.



Young Ellen (Stowe) Roberts

B. T. left that afternoon, a day late but full of hope.

Two weeks later, Ellen got a letter from B. T. "Really a treat," she said. She replied, realizing B. T. had stirred some deep feelings in her. As it turned out, B. T. was feeling the same.

B. T. traveled to far western New York to begin his first year as a Methodist preacher. He wrote to Ellen, and she replied. Though separated by 400 miles, their friendship blossomed swiftly into love. They hardly knew each other at first, but their relationship grew as letters flew back and forth.

The next time they saw each other was on their wedding day the following May. They were wed in the Manhattan home of Ellen's uncle, George Lane, publisher for the Methodist Church.

Benjamin and Ellen were committed Christians—that was their deepest bond. Their lives were given to each other, to God, and to the mission of the church in the world.

They had a remarkably close marriage, despite constant travels once B. T. became Free Methodist general superintendent. He said marriage should be an equal partnership, and they tried to live that throughout their years together.

*Yours affectionately
B. J. Roberts*

Radical Roots

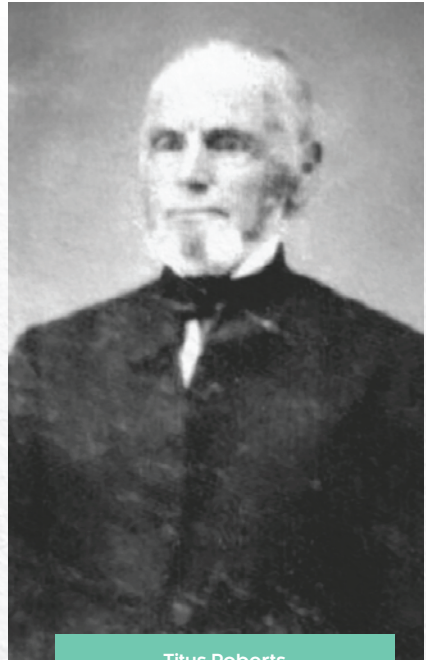
B. T. Roberts was born July 25, 1823 and lived to almost seventy.

He finally succumbed to congestive heart failure in 1893 while traveling in western New York. His life spanned most of the political, social, economic, and technological revolutions of the nineteenth century, including the Civil War.

B. T.'s parents were Titus and Sally Roberts. The family lived first near Forestville in northern Chautauqua County. Later they moved east to Gowanda, a small town nestled in the valley created by Cattaraugus Creek as it winds northwest to Lake Erie.



Sally Roberts



Titus Roberts

For a while B. T. studied Latin with the local Presbyterian pastor, John Preston. He was now about fifteen, and the pastor offered to educate him for church ministry. Roberts replied, "I cannot accept it, as I have not yet been converted." B. T. had been converted to the antislavery cause, but not yet to Jesus.

He was converted mainly through self-examination. Still interested in law, he did a two-year apprenticeship under an attorney in Little Falls, New York, supporting himself by school teaching. He returned home in 1844 and began preparing for the bar exam.

B. T. agreed intellectually with Christianity, but had never committed himself to Christ. Around the time of his twenty-first birthday, friends invited him to a Sunday afternoon prayer meeting. Midway through the service an illiterate barrel-maker stood and with stammering lips told how God had changed him. The man's simple humility touched B. T. deeply. He saw himself as a lost sinner in need of God's grace. Convinced "it was my duty to become a Christian," he said, he began struggling over control of his life. He was willing to be a sold-out Christian so long as he could still follow his legal career. That wouldn't work with God.

Finally it came down to a decision between the law and God. "Christ demanded an unconditional surrender," Roberts said. "I made it. The joys of pardon and peace flowed into my soul. My cup was full, my happiness was unspeakable."

He began training for Methodist ministry. The first step was Genesee Wesleyan Seminary near Rochester to prepare for college. He entered the school in April 1845 for the summer term. Then it was on to Wesleyan University, where he completed a rigorous four-year liberal arts education—and where, at the end of those years, he met Ellen Stowe.

Ellen of Windsor

Ellen Stow grew up in the small town of Windsor, New York, along the Susquehanna River.

She was the granddaughter of Nathan Lane, who ran a saw and grist mill. Nathan was not religious, but his wife was one of founding members of the Windsor Presbyterian Church in 1793. Ellen later wrote that her “Presbyterian grandmother” trained her “never to overload Saturday with work, as with the setting sun we must be in readiness for the coming Sabbath.”



Young Ellen (Stowe) Roberts

The Lanes’ daughter Dorcas (Ellen’s mother) eventually married Stoddard Stow. The couple had seven children. Ellen, the fifth, was born on March 4, 1825. Stoddard Stow was “decidedly irreligious,” but Ellen herself was taught “to pray, strictly to observe the Sabbath, and to attend the Presbyterian church,” she said.

Ellen lived with her uncle and aunt, George and Lydia Lane, in New York City for ten years. Manhattan in the vicinity of the Methodist Book Concern was Ellen’s home until the day she married B. T. in 1849. She attended Rutgers Female Institute and started spelling her last name “Stowe” rather than “Stow.”

The holiness movement was just then getting underway. Phoebe Palmer and her husband Dr. Walter Palmer lived nearby and attended the Allen Street Methodist Episcopal Church.



Phoebe had recently experienced a deep work of God's Spirit in her life, and the next year took over leadership of the Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness—really the center of the holiness movement at this time.

Ellen grew very close to her Aunt Lydia, while her Uncle George modeled the life of a Christian gentleman. Lydia devoted her life to the church and ministry among the city's poor. Ellen wrote of Lydia, "How she would pray! She would bring heaven down." Under these influences, Ellen grew spiritually. She radiated a quiet charisma. Physically attractive, she was quiet, introverted, loving to spend time alone—a Stowe family trait.

Ten Years a Methodist Preacher

B. T. Roberts began pastoring in 1848—a time of big transition in both Methodism and American culture.

The Methodist Church was fast becoming America's largest Protestant denomination. Prospering Methodist churches in New York, Buffalo, and Boston contrasted sharply with comparatively poor Methodists on the frontier. This contrast prompted divisions over the very nature and identity of Methodism and its theological core.

B. T.'s preaching ministry began about midpoint in the decades-long shift within Methodist clergy from frontier circuit rider to settled professional pastor. Like earlier circuit riders, B. T. was an evangelist and revivalist charged with organizing new Methodist groups, and liable to be moved year by year. Like a professional pastor however he served one congregation, was a recognized "minister" in the community, had a parsonage, and received a salary.

Methodist preachers could serve only two years at each church. B. T. served seven churches in ten years. He was sent first to Caryville, northwest of Batavia. He was still single; he and Ellen married the following May.

On Sunday, September 17, 1848, B. T. preached morning and afternoon and led an evening prayer meeting. He wrote, "I never had such feelings when attempting to preach as I did in the morning...I felt that most were sitting as critics, comparing me



B.T. Roberts

with their former preacher. In the afternoon I had a much better time, and was greatly assisted from on high.”

The prayer meeting gave him a chance to gauge the congregation’s spiritual depth. The prayers showed “a low state of piety,” he felt. He wrote, “A general coldness and stupor prevail among the members, as far as I can learn; but they are said to be united, and in each other’s confidence.” Officially there were 108 members, but only eighty or ninety seemed to be active. Roberts was encouraged, however.

Throughout the years of his pastoral ministry, B. T. commonly preached half a dozen or more times weekly. He and Ellen served Methodist churches at Pike, Rushford, and then at Buffalo Niagara Street, 1852-53. From there they were sent to Brockport. They had a fruitful ministry at this Erie Canal town. B. T. led a stirring revival and founded the Bergen Camp Meeting. But he and Ellen also suffered tragedy. They now had two small boys, George and Benson. Their only daughter, Sarah Georgiana, was born in January, 1855. But in August, Sarah took ill and died. Ellen and B. T. were devastated. The Lord gave them strength to carry on and continue their ministry, they felt.

B. T. and Ellen were sent next to the Methodist Church at Albion. B. T. served there two years, 1855-57. He began to publish articles in the Methodist press. In April and May 1856 he published three articles in the *Northern Christian Advocate* entitled, “Free Churches.” On biblical, theological, and practical grounds, he argued against renting and selling pews—a popular fundraising gimmick. “Let everyone give as in apostolic days, according to his circumstances, and the Church can be far more easily sustained than under the pew system,” he argued. He was pushing back against the growing Methodist practice, especially in larger cities, of raising money to erect impressive stone or brick buildings by auctioning off the pews.

Roberts’ articles landed him in hot water. The influential group of older pastors who controlled the business of the Genesee Conference, where B. T. was serving, were incensed by his articles.

New School Methodism

Just six days before the 1857 Genesee Annual Conference, B. T. published a two-part article, "New School Methodism." This was the event that led most directly to B. T.'s expulsion from the Methodist Episcopal Church. The article offended powerful leaders in the conference.

B. T. identified no one by name, but publishing the article went against the "affectionate request" of the 1856 annual conference that preachers not publish "articles relating to or implicating members of this Conference." B. T.'s article attacked pew rental and theological departures from historic Methodism. It claimed that a group of about thirty preachers were spreading a "new theory of religion" in the conference, teaching something "very different from that of the Fathers of Methodism." They put good works in place of faith in Christ and held that justification and sanctification were the same.

When conference met, some leading preachers brought charges against Roberts. He was accused of "unchristian and immoral and conduct" because of his article.

Over several days, the conference conducted a full church trial under the chairmanship of Bishop Osman Baker. Roberts used his lawyerly skills to rebut the charges.

In the end he was convicted, fifty-two to forty-three, several preachers abstaining.



B.T. Roberts

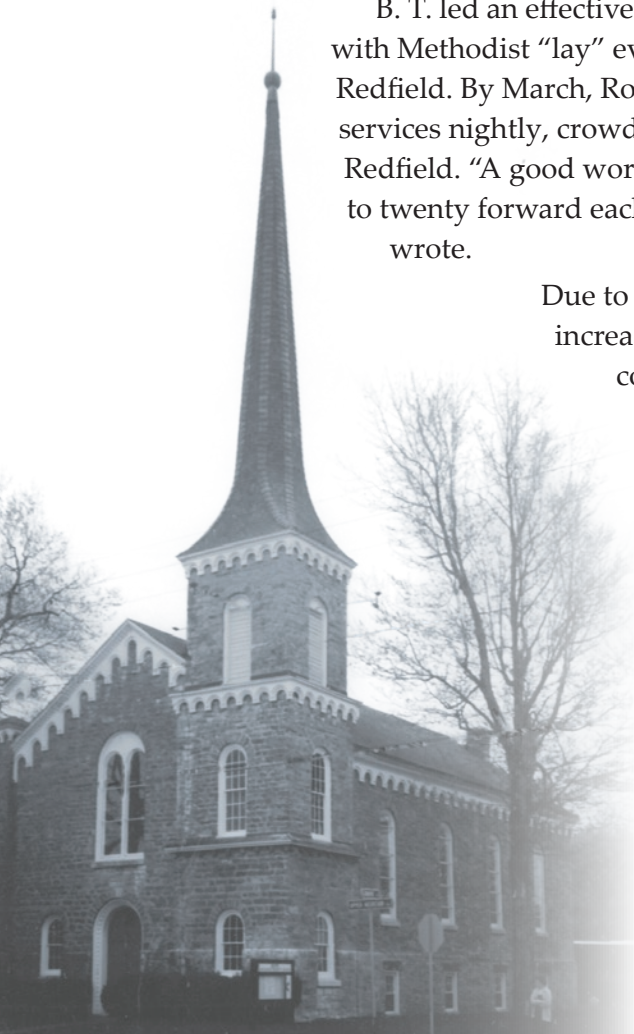
Some wanted to expel B. T. on the spot. The conference voted rather that he receive just a reprimand from the bishop. B. T. accepted the rebuke, but not its justice. He would appeal the case to the 1860 General Conference, he said.

The matter might have ended there. But people across the conference who knew B. T. were outraged. The trial further stirred up division. Without telling Roberts, a man in the conference published an inflammatory account, naming the preachers who voted against Roberts.

This year B. T. was sent to Pekin, a substantial congregation with 160 members. He began what would be his last year as a Methodist preacher.

B. T. led an effective revival during the year with Methodist “lay” evangelist John Wesley Redfield. By March, Roberts was holding services nightly, crowds coming to hear him or Redfield. “A good work is in progress, from ten to twenty forward each night” at the altar, B. T. wrote.

Due to his trial, B. T. was increasingly known in the conference. Other churches invited him to preach. George Estes, the man who had published the account of Roberts’ trial, reprinted and circulated widely B. T.’s “New School Methodism” article prefaced by the trial account. This wasn’t B. T.’s doing, but it led to a second trial in 1858.



Roberts' second trial was long and complex. B. T. again ably defended himself, though the outcome was pretty much a foregone conclusion. He was again convicted, sixty-two to thirty-two, with many abstentions. Then by a vote of fifty-four to thirty-three, B. T. was expelled from the conference and denomination. Allegedly B. T. was convicted for having a hand in the republication of "New School Methodism." The trial was really about the direction Methodism was heading and Roberts' audacity in challenging the conference power structure. Not surprised, Roberts again said he would appeal to the upcoming General Conference.

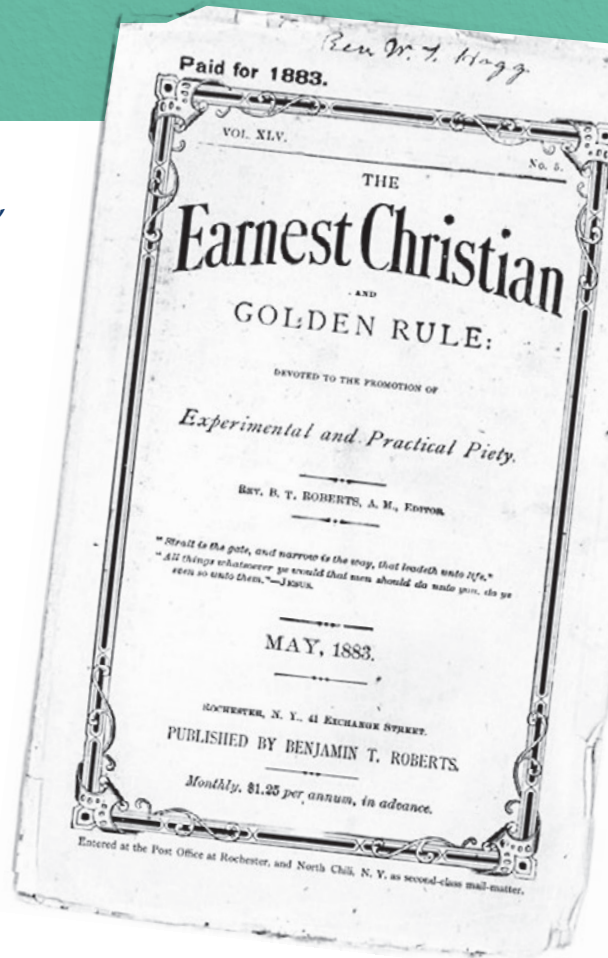
When annual conference closed on October 22, 1858, Roberts found himself without a church, denomination, ministerial assignment, and without a parsonage. Fortunately he and Ellen had bought a house in Buffalo five years earlier. Ellen felt more like laughing than crying—"the laugh of an innocent child that has no care." They attended services at

Pekin the next day. Since B. T. had been ousted as pastor, Brother Wilcox, a local preacher, led the service.

Wider Fields of Labor

The next two years—late 1858 to the summer of 1860, when the Free Methodist Church was officially organized—were an in-between time for B. T. and Ellen. They made their home in Buffalo, and B. T. traveled widely holding meetings as he was invited. Many Methodist folk, upset with the drift of Methodism and Roberts' expulsion, left their churches and started independent meetings. A few local churches left the denomination entirely and started calling themselves "Free Methodists." Some Methodists held Laymen's Conventions, as they called them. These pledged to support Roberts and McCreery financially.

Two important things happened during this liminal period. In January 1860, B. T. founded *The Earnest Christian*. The journal circulated widely across the U.S. Northeast and into Canada and some more distant states. After the U.S. Civil War erupted, the magazine found its way into the hands of some Union soldiers as they were in the camps or on campaign.



The other significant event was the founding of the first Free Methodist church—not in New York however, but in St. Louis, Missouri, where slavery and slave auctions still occurred. John Wesley Redfield was conducting a revival there, and he asked Roberts to come and organize a “free church.” B. T. set out by rail and arrived in St. Louis in early 1860. Here he witnessed slavery firsthand, watching “a drove of slaves going through the streets on their way probably to the South.” He wrote, “The blight of slavery extends to everything. We feel its crushing influence even in our little meetings. God help me to do all I can in behalf of poor suffering humanity.”

B. T. organized a “free” church that strictly forbade slaveholding. In western New York, “Free Methodist” meant free pews and freedom of the Spirit. But in St. Louis, “Free Methodist” especially meant freedom from slaveholding and, by implication, freedom for slaves and the end of slavery.

The term “Free Methodist” thus took on broader meaning. Free pews was the first of four main reasons for the term “Free.” The second was protest against the growing problem of slaveholding among Methodists in the South. Slaveholding violated the Methodist Discipline. Slaves should be free, which meant churches should be free. Early “Free” Methodists also promoted freedom from secret societies (such as Masons and Odd Fellows) and the freedom of the Spirit in worship and song and Christian living.

In May 1860, the Methodist Episcopal General Conference met in Buffalo. B. T. and Ellen attended some sessions as observers, hoping the conference would overturn his expulsion so he could resume ministry as a Methodist. The conference did not do so. This meant a new Free Methodist denomination probably would have to be formed.

Free Methodists: A New Denomination

The Free Methodist Church had a double founding in the summer of 1860. On Monday, July 2, “Free” Methodists in Illinois held a Laymen’s Convention in DuPage County, west of Chicago, in connection with the independent St. Charles Camp Meeting. B. T. presided. This was the organizing event of the new denomination in “the West” — that is, Illinois. The convention took steps that set the Free Methodist Church in operation in Illinois and Missouri. It appointed preachers to eleven places, including “Iowa Mission” and “Michigan.” John Wesley Redfield was named superintendent over the Illinois region, and B. T. Roberts was unanimously elected General Superintendent.

Organizing the denomination in the east happened seven weeks later, on August 23, 1860, on a farm near Pekin, New York. The organizing convention affirmed “unfaltering attachment to the doctrines and proper usages of the M. E. Church.” In *The Earnest Christian* B. T. spelled out the basis for the new denomination. Free Methodists would hold to the same doctrines as early Methodism did. The new church was committed to free seats, congregational singing without instrumental music, and plainness of dress. There would be equal representation of ministers and members at all the levels of the Church, not a church dominated by clergy. Slaveholding and secret societies (such as the Masons) were banned. In general, the Free Methodist Church adopted stricter membership standards than the M E. Church had.

In New York State, B. T. Roberts was enthusiastically elected general superintendent, as he had been in Illinois.

Following these organizing conventions, Free Methodist churches sprang up many places. B. T. was busy traveling,

organizing local congregations and setting up annual conferences on the Methodist pattern.

B.T. found himself at the head of a growing movement. “From all directions calls are coming for the establishment of free churches,” he reported in June 1861.

The vision of B. T. and Ellen Roberts was not reactionary. B. T. strove to move away from reaction into mission—the twofold mission of maintaining biblical Christianity and ministering the gospel among the poor. His vision was to move in sync with the renewing work of the Holy Spirit as seen in original Methodism.

From the first, the new denomination surged with momentum. The 1864 *Minutes of the Annual Conferences* report three annual conferences (Illinois, Genesee, and Susquehanna), membership of 3,655 with sixty-seven preachers, and church property valued at \$64,653. In the next six years membership grew to 6,556, the number of preachers nearly doubled, church property was valued at \$234,700, and new conferences were formed in Michigan and Kansas.

As the fledgling denomination grew, Roberts traveled widely, promoting its interests.

His widening travels coincided with the rapid growth of railroads. Newly completed trunk lines across New York and Pennsylvania and on west allowed him to travel far and fast. He went repeatedly to New York City as well as to Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and many points in between. Later he and Ellen traveled across the continent to California, Oregon, and Washington in the interests of the church.

Even as Roberts was traveling and publishing *The Earnest Christian*, he and Ellen continued their ministry in Buffalo. They opened a mission above a saloon in Buffalo’s notorious Five Points, the heart of the busy port area where the Erie Canal connected with Lake Erie. Here “almost every building has a brothel and a bar,” B. T. said.

Benjamin and Ellen, with other workers, began ministry at Five Points in the summer of 1861. Roberts and his associates

preached at the docks. A boatman was spiritually awakened. When he took sick, he called “for some of our people to go and pray with him,” B. T. wrote, and soon was soundly converted. In June, 1862, B. T. found a large room above a saloon on Canal Street, and rented it for ten dollars a month. He put in seats and began meetings. “We needed no bell,” B. T. wrote. “The sound of praise and prayer was sufficient at any time to draw a large congregation. Soon five women and two men were converted.”

Benjamin and Ellen felt a safe house must be provided for these young women. They provided for them “a home in our family, until the way is opened for them to take care of themselves in a respectable manner,” B. T. wrote. He appealed for Christian sisters to help by taking these young women into their families, “looking after them, caring for them, and helping them on in the way to heaven...Many of them are quite young, and to hear the sad stories of the wrongs they suffered, which brought ruin upon them, would make your hearts bleed.”

Roberts’ sense of justice and indignation was aroused by the way these girls had been victimized. But he later reflected, “You cannot go where the love of God has not gone before you by his blessed Spirit to lead sinners to Christ.”

Chili Seminary

Not long after the formation of the Free Methodist Church, B. T. began to talk of founding a school “where poor boys and girls could be helped to an education.” He and Ellen moved from Buffalo to Rochester, their family now including five boys ranging in age from twelve to a few months.

After considering various options, in 1866 B. T. and Ellen bought a 145-acre farm in nearby North Chili, where a strong Free Methodist church was already thriving. They started the school in the farmhouse, calling it Chili Seminary (meaning a primary school).

B. T. hired Miss Delia Jeffries as the first teacher, and he taught classes himself. To govern the school, B. T. formed a sixteen-member Board of Trustees.



B. T. announced the school in the May 1866 *Earnest Christian*. "Children should have religious training," he began. "Their welfare for both worlds requires it." Scripture must have a prominent place. Education should include both body and mind: "Children should also be trained up to the practice of labor, for work is a blessing, not a curse." Students were to work three to five hours daily in the school or on the farm.

The first year was a success. More space was needed, so B. T. arranged to use an old hotel in North Chili and began planning a school building. This was ready by the fall of 1869.

At this time North Chili sported a tavern. B. T. saw this as a bad influence and resolved to get rid of it. Finding the business could be purchased for about \$500, he organized a temperance rally, came up with the needed funds, and bought the tavern. "It was closed, and the blight of liquor was in a great measure removed from the community," Benson Roberts wrote.

Chili Seminary published its first annual catalogue in 1870, a twelve-page booklet listing all 56 students. By 1870-71, the school was using the Standardized Regents Examinations. B. T. felt a dormitory system in which the non-local students "all board in the school buildings . . . divided up into congenial families of about twenty each" was the best arrangement for a Christian school.

In 1885 the name was changed to A. M. Chesbrough Seminary due to a \$30,000 gift from the estate of Abram Merritt Chesbrough. The legacy stipulated that the school buy the Roberts farm and invest the balance of the bequest in "good securities" to provide ongoing scholarships for needy students.

By 1891-92, Chesbrough Seminary had a three-year College Preparatory Course, a four-year Academic Course (essentially a high-school program), a four-year English Course "for those who do not care to study Latin," and a Christian Workers' Course "open to young men and women alike." The school was on its way to becoming Roberts Wesleyan University.

Fifty-six students came in 1869-70, jumping to 102 the next year. Over the next three decades enrollment averaged in the eighties and nineties, usually slightly more boys than girls. Four of the Roberts sons were enrolled.

A student from the 1870s, David S. Warner, recalled the intense earnestness of B. T. and Ellen's ministry. "I can in memory see him now, as, with head thrown back, and eyes closed in his peculiar manner, he sang the song, 'All I want, all I want, all I want, Is a little more faith in Jesus.'" Since B. T. was often away, Warner noted, "much of the care and burden of the Seminary," including financial pressures, were Ellen's. In her view, "It was not enough for [students] to maintain a profession of religion, but they must receive the outpouring of the Spirit again and again." Ellen usually led the Tuesday evening general "class meeting," which included prayer and testimonies and became an important part of school life.

In 1880, B. T. built a home for his family on the south side of Buffalo Road, just across the street from campus. This large "house on the hill" was home for the rest of their lives.

In 1876 Benson Roberts, just graduated from Dartmouth, took over as principal of the seminary. Benson and Emma Sellev were married the next year and together served as co-principals.

Growing Global Reach

B. T. Roberts promoted foreign missions. He became particularly interested in Africa due largely to reports of the explorations of Livingstone and Stanley. He expected to see great things accomplished for God's kingdom through Free Methodist missions, in Africa and elsewhere.

The denomination formed a General Missionary Board. Soon Free Methodist missionaries were serving in other lands. Missionaries went to India in 1880; Portuguese East Africa, South Africa, and Liberia in 1885; the Dominican Republic in 1889; Japan in 1895; Egypt in 1899; and China in 1904. So far as B. T. was concerned, foreign missions were the natural extension of the church's primary mission to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity and preach the gospel to the poor.



B. T. and Ellen Roberts' Final Years



B. T. Roberts died on Monday, February 27, 1893, while traveling by train in western New York. Ellen, who survived him by more than a decade, was devastated that she couldn't be with him at the end. His funeral was held the following Thursday afternoon, March 2, at Chesbrough Seminary. Cox Memorial Hall had just been completed, and the funeral was held in its fine auditorium. The large sliding doors into the auditorium were opened for the first time to accommodate the crowd.

Ellen continued to live as a widow in the family home on the hill across from campus. For years she kept up a wide-ranging correspondence which, as she grew more aged, she only reluctantly gave up. Her rheumatism grew more severe. Yet she noted in her diary on July 30, 1904, "I never had such a spirit of prayer given me as this night, beyond my power to explain or tell about it, except that God was in it—the Holy Spirit prompted it."

Ellen peacefully breathed her last on Tuesday, January 28, 1908, in her eighty-second year. She died at the home she and B. T. shared for a dozen years and where she lived for another fifteen. Benson said, "For her it was no great change, in a way, for she had walked with God through many of the long years of her life."

The funeral, held in Cox Hall, was marked by simplicity. Ellen's four sons and their wives attended, along with five grandchildren. Free Methodist ministers of the Genesee Conference bore the casket.

Jubilee Singers

An early incident from B. T. Roberts' train travels as general superintendent captures his character. A group of well-dressed young African Americans boarded the train and entered B. T.'s car.

One of the passengers was incensed. He insisted the conductor put the group in second-class.

"They have first-class tickets," the conductor explained.

The irate passenger said he shouldn't have to ride with "n--." But B. T. spoke up, defending the young men and women. They took their seats and the train went on.

Upon reaching their destination, the young people gathered around B. T. and "thanked him in cultivated language" and sang him "a most beautiful song," wrote B. T.'s son Benson.

B. T. learned these youth were the famed Jubilee Singers from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Formed in 1871, the Jubilee Singers won international acclaim, introducing white audiences to Negro spirituals like "Steal Away" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Their music "stirred the nation to an appreciation of what the black man [and woman] could do who had the school-master instead of the overseer for a guide," Benson Roberts wrote. B. T. was their defender simply as a matter of equality and justice. "He would take the part of the oppressed," said Benson.

This happened in the mid-1870s, when B. T. was in his fifties. It captures the tenor of his whole life. Shortly after his death, Edward Payson Hart, a colleague in the general superintendency of the denomination and founder of what is now Spring Arbor University, wrote: "Our brother was manifestly raised up to head a movement inaugurated to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity and to preach the Gospel to the poor."

The Roberts Legacy Today

Benjamin Titus and Ellen Stowe Roberts left a legacy that still radiates globally. We can chart this legacy in four dimensions.

First, the legacy of their lives and witness.

B. T. often said the mission of the Free Methodist Church was “To maintain the Bible standard of Christianity, and to preach the Gospel to the poor.” This is simple yet profound. It reflects B. T. and Ellen themselves.

The lives of B. T. and Ellen embodied this passion: A passion for Jesus, for the poor, for equality, for justice, for holiness for all people. B. T. believed that Christians should be well grounded in the liberal arts so they could be well-rounded and use all their gifts in ministry to people and the larger culture. It was Roberts’ passion for justice that prompted him to found the Farmers’ Alliance.

Whatever their imperfections, B. T. and Ellen Roberts in their personal lives, their ministries, and in their marriage sought devoutly to incarnate the gospel they proclaimed. They were moved by service, not status. It was a matter of character.

Second, the legacy of their institutions.

Many institutions still serving today were founded by B. T. Roberts and then others who followed his example. These include not only Roberts Wesleyan University, but a number of other colleges, universities, hospitals, orphanages, and urban missions in North America and around the world.

Education was of prime importance to B. T. and Ellen. A high point came in October 1892 when three new buildings

were dedicated the same day—Roberts Hall (as it is now called), Cox Hall, and a two-story dormitory and dining room built as an addition to the farmhouse. A. B. Simpson, leader of the newly-formed Christian Alliance (now Christian and Missionary Alliance) gave a stirring missionary address. B. T. described it as “full of argument, pathos, and power. A fire was kindled that will be felt to the remote parts of the earth. A strong missionary spirit prevails among the teachers and students of this Seminary, and it was greatly quickened under the fervent appeals of Mr. Simpson.”

Third, the legacy of their hope.

Like John Wesley, B. T. and Ellen Roberts lived out an *optimism of grace*. They breathed a vital hope for the renewal of the church and the coming of the God’s kingdom because of their living faith in Jesus Christ and their trust in God’s Word.

Writing to Ellen from Ocean Grove, New Jersey, in March 1891, B. T. added this comment at the end of his letter—a comment that speaks volumes about his attitude and optimism of grace. God was working in the church, he believed. Yes, there are many weaknesses. “But then, God is overturning, overturning & ’ere long we will see harmony everywhere. Amen.”

Fourth, the legacy of their populism.

Populism means *of and for the people*. In Roberts’ case this meant all people, all humans and especially the poor and oppressed, slaves and former slaves. It also meant one hundred percent equality for women.

This was B. T. and Ellen Roberts’ conviction, not as political ideology, but as the meaning and application of the Good News of Jesus Christ and his kingdom in the world. The transforming gospel of Jesus was for the world now as well as the world to come.



So I call B. T. and Ellen “populist saints.” I became fascinated by their lives. I tell their stories in detail in the book *Populist Saints*. B. T. and Ellen were not populists in any ideological sense, but their populism did have economic and political overtones because they were passionate about justice and equality for all people, especially the poor.

Not of course that these two very human persons had no failings or blemishes. Like all of us, they had feet of clay. But they advocated and sought to live a life of freedom, holiness, and justice that was for *all the people*, especially the oppressed. For that is what they saw in Jesus. Freedom and joy in Jesus Christ was their own experience. They were populist saints, proclaiming a radical holy populism.

In the end, perhaps the most enduring legacy of B. T. and Ellen Roberts is the gracious paradox of their large-souled spirit combined with their radical commitment to Jesus and his kingdom.

Maybe that’s what happens to anyone who really knows Jesus well.

#

To learn the whole Roberts story and the full account of the founding of Roberts Wesleyan University, read *Populist Saints: B. T. and Ellen Roberts and the First Free Methodists* (932 pp.) or the condensed version, *B. T. and Ellen Roberts and the First Free Methodists* (248 pp.).



MARSTON
MEMORIAL
HISTORICAL
CENTER &
FREE METHODIST ARCHIVE

Photos provided by
Marston Historical Center
historical.fmcusa.org/



fmcusa.org/history

Copyright ©2022 Howard Snyder.