

Introducing Black Harry Hoosier: The History Behind Indiana's Namesake

Stephen H. Webb*

Indiana's nickname is as distinctive as its source is mysterious. Early in the nineteenth century, Hoosier was a common synonym in the South for a yokel or bumpkin, but there is no record of how the term came to be used as slang or what it originally meant. The earliest Indiana settlers brought this word with them from the Appalachian region, but they left behind no trace of its etymology. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Indiana citizens had transformed this label of abuse and disparagement into a badge of pride and identity. Indiana folk were proud to be Hoosiers, but what did that mean?

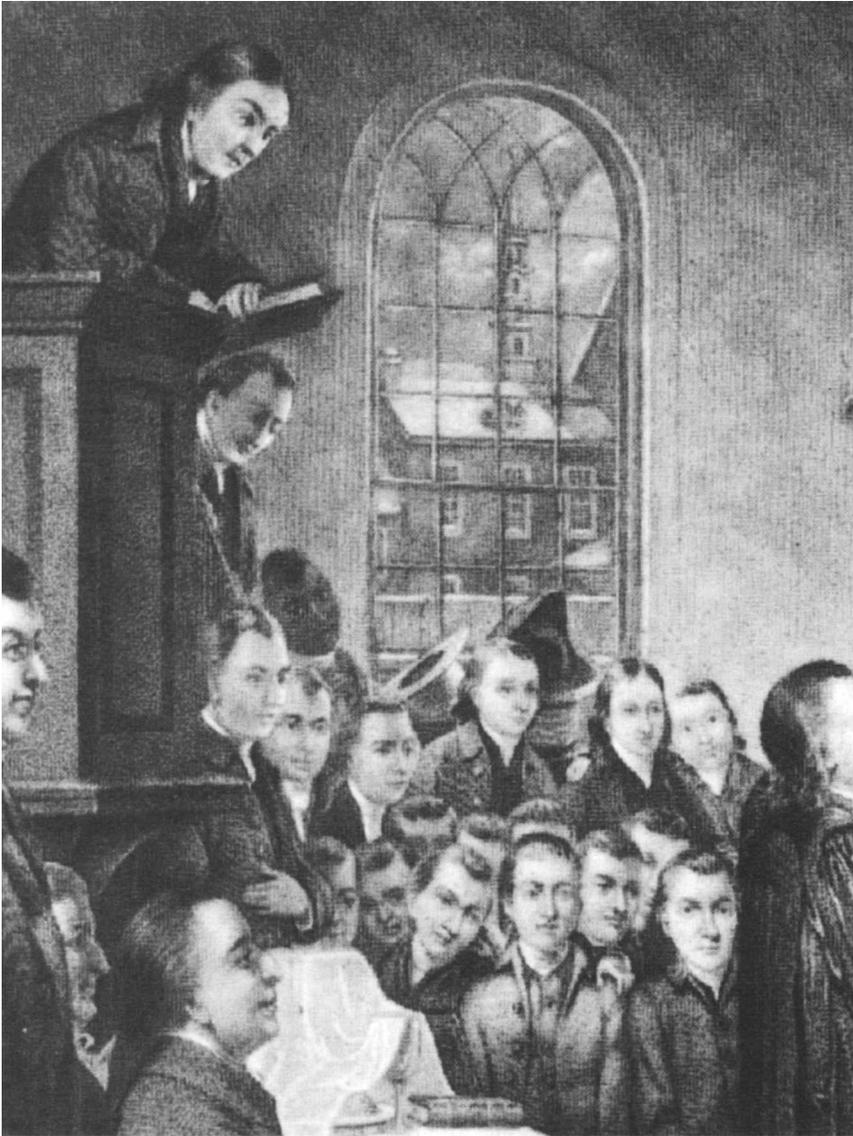
While nicknames like Buckeye, Badger, and Wolverine need no explanation, the derivation of Hoosier has become a source of amusement and speculation. Kentuckians were the first to joke that the term came from the practice of isolated Indiana farmers yelling "Who's yere" to approaching strangers. There was also a yarn about a bar fight after which somebody wondered "whose ear" was left lying on the floor. Hoosiers themselves, trying to put a more respectable spin on their name, sometimes told about a man with that surname who hired people from Indiana to work outside the state. Indianans were thus associated with a certain Mr. Hoosier. Although it might be pleasing to imagine that the nickname comes from an original Hoosier who treated his workers so well that they became identified with him, there is no evidence to support the existence of this mythological figure.

Fortunately, it is unnecessary to invent a first Hoosier because one already exists, and he was a noted figure in his own right. Historians of early American religion have long acknowledged the importance of Harry Hoosier, a Methodist preacher famous for his eloquence.¹ Those who heard Hoosier preach found him hard to forget. Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745–1813), a signer of the Declaration of Independence, acknowledged that "making allowances for his illiteracy he was the greatest orator in America."² Outside a narrow circle of scholars, how-

*Stephen H. Webb is associate professor of religion and philosophy, Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana.

¹See, for example, Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn., 1989), 106, 134.

²Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (2 vols., New York, 1864), I, 174.



SECTION SHOWING HARRY HOOSIER FROM A. GILCHRIST CAMPBELL'S ENGRAVING OF PAINTING BY THOMAS COKE RUCKLE, *THE ORDINATION OF BISHOP ASBURY*. THE WHOLE PAINTING IS REPRODUCED ON P. 32.

Courtesy of Drew University Methodist Collection, Madison, New Jersey



*THE ORDINATION OF BISHOP ASBURY ENGRAVED BY A. GILCHRIST CAMPBELL FROM A PAINTING BY THOMAS COKE RUCKLE.
HARRY HOOSIER IS IN THE LEFT CORNER OF THE PICTURE.*

Courtesy of Drew University Methodist Collection, Madison, New Jersey

ever, he is virtually unknown today. In a 1995 article in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, William D. Piersen made a persuasive case linking the Methodist pioneer known as Black Harry with the Indiana nickname, but too many Hoosiers are still unaware of Piersen's argument.³ People from Indiana take pride in having the most distinctive state nickname, but they can be yet prouder of the person whose name it was.

Although there is no full biography of Harry Hoosier, there is plenty of evidence from Methodist documents to piece together a sketch of his remarkable career.⁴ It was made possible by events in England, where a revolution in spirituality opened new possibilities for the poor. John Wesley (1703–1791) sought to reform the Anglican Church through revival, and as a result he founded what came to be called Methodism. Wesley took the Christian message to those who were on the margins of established religion by delivering passionate sermons that emphasized a personal, rather than institutional, expression of faith. Since Wesley worked outside the regular channels of Anglican authority, he recruited lay persons to assist him with evangelism. Wesley required these exhorters, as they were sometimes known, to travel widely in order to preach to the unchurched. Thus was born the Methodist system of itinerant ministry.⁵

In America, this system was even more important than it was in England. Vast tracts of land were settled sparsely, and ordained and educated clergy were in short supply. The Methodists took religion to the people by organizing revival meetings where passion was more important than doctrine. Weeping, shouting, and groaning were common at these services, although the emphasis was on deliverance from sin and the joyful experience of salvation that was available to everyone. The converted were encouraged to demonstrate their experience of God's grace by growing in holiness and Christian perfection. They were supported by Methodist societies that, at first, were meant to supplement, not replace, traditional churches.

Those who heard the call to preach at these revivals had to be prepared for a hard life on the road, without the comforts of a family or a permanent home. Many of these exhorters had as little access to formal schooling or organized religion as those who came to hear

³William D. Piersen, "The Origin of the Word 'Hoosier': A New Interpretation," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XCI (June 1995), 189-96. Instead of repeating Piersen's argument, this article will complement his essay with a portrait of Harry Hoosier and a reflection on why Indianans should be proud of the original Hoosier.

⁴Warren Thomas Smith, *Harry Hosier, Circuit Rider* (Nashville, Tenn., 1981); Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as it Developed among Blacks in America* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976); and William B. McClain, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

⁵See E. Dale Dunlap, "The United Methodist System of Itinerant Ministry," in *Rethinking Methodist History: A Bicentennial Historical Consultation*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Kenneth E. Rowe (Nashville, Tenn., 1985).

them speak. Their shared experience enabled them to reach out to those who, because of their physical or social isolation, had been neglected by other churches. These people included African Americans, both freedmen and slaves. Blacks were attracted to the informal and spontaneous nature of the Methodist revival meetings, where they were permitted to participate alongside whites. They were also inspired by the strong stand the Methodist leadership, following the guidance of Wesley himself, took against slavery.⁶ The Methodist message of personal holiness cut across racial, social, and economic lines, and a few of the most gifted blacks who joined the movement were encouraged to become preachers.⁷

Harry Hoosier was one of the first and possibly the best of this group. He was illiterate, so the spelling of his name varies in the sources (Hosier, Hoosier, Hoshur, and Hossier). All of the spellings of his name by his contemporaries, however, produce the same phonetic effect, and the way he pronounced his name is similar to the way Hoosier is pronounced today. Nevertheless, the evidence for the connection between his name and Indiana's nickname is circumstantial, which leaves room for skepticism. Compared to the alternative explanations, however, this theory not only makes a better story but also has an explanatory power that the others lack. Surely it is more than coincidence that the evolution of this term followed the same path that the early Indiana settlers took from the Appalachian frontier. It also makes sense that these pioneers would have been eager to forget its origin, consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, many nicknames began as slurs on religious activities or expressions of racial prejudice, and this theory fits that pattern.

Hoosier's birthdate is usually given as 1750, but there is no documentation about either his parents or his early years. Some have speculated that he was a slave of Harry Dorsey Gough (17?-1808), who owned a plantation near Baltimore. Gough converted to Methodism and built a chapel on his property where circuit riders would preach twice a month. Though no one knows where or how Harry Hoosier obtained his last name, at some point after he was manumitted his speaking skills came to the attention of the Methodist leadership.⁸

⁶However, Methodists did not preach the full equality of the races. Although early Methodist statements about slavery denounced it as evil, some leaders were willing to compromise with this institution, and the church gradually adopted the position that it should not contravene the laws of civil authority.

⁷"Stressing the conversion experience instead of the process of religious instruction made Christianity more accessible to illiterate slaves and slaveholders alike." Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978), 132. Moreover, "The tendency of evangelical religion to level the souls of all men before God became manifest when awakened blacks preached to unconverted whites." *Ibid.*, 133-34.

⁸Warren Thomas Smith, "Harry Hosier: Black Preacher Extraordinary," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, VII (Spring 1980), 113.

Francis Asbury (1745–1816), the patriarch of American Methodism, answered Wesley’s call for workers to spread the movement in America in 1771 and traveled from England to Philadelphia. He was a diligent evangelist whose wide travels served as a model for the subsequent circuit riders who took Methodism to the frontier. During the American Revolution Asbury was forced to go into hiding, because Wesley’s opposition to the war made him vulnerable to charges of sympathizing with the Tories. Afterwards Asbury emerged, along with Thomas Coke, as the leader of the Methodist movement. At his side was the first African American to obtain national prestige as a religious figure, Harry Hoosier.

Asbury first mentions Hoosier in his journal in an entry dated June 28, 1780, though it has been suggested that they met as early as 1775. At first, Hoosier accompanied Asbury as a traveling companion and servant; but Hoosier soon proved himself a worthy colleague. Asbury preached to white people while Hoosier preached to slaves. Hoosier would substitute for Asbury when he was sick, and in some cases, Hoosier was asked to preach immediately after Asbury finished his sermon. At Falls Church, Virginia, Asbury wrote, “Preached at the Chapel; afterwards Harry, a black man, spoke on the barren fig-tree. The circumstance was new, and the white people looked on with attention.”⁹ This was the first opportunity for this audience to hear a public speech by a black man.

By all accounts, his white audiences liked what they saw and heard. Asbury admits in his journal that the best way to draw a large congregation was to announce that Hoosier would preach. While the content of his sermons probably differed little from those of his fellow exhorters, his style was significantly different. A contemporary description of Hoosier provides clues for understanding his success:

He was of middling stature; slim, but very strongly built, and very black; capable of great labour and much endurance. He also possessed a most musical voice, which he could modulate with the skill of a master, and use with the most complete success in the pathetic, terrible, or persuasive parts of a discourse. . . . He was never at a loss in preaching, but was very acceptable wherever he went, and few of the white preachers could equal him, in his way.¹⁰

The two drawings of Hoosier that survive confirm this portrait of a persuasive yet humble man. One drawing shows Hoosier seated with one hand resting on the Bible and the other hand reaching out to a white man who is listening intently to his words. The other drawing shows a kind, unassuming face with large, sympathetic eyes.¹¹

⁹Francis Asbury, *Journals and Letters*, eds. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton (3 vols., London, 1958), I, 403.

¹⁰G. A. Raybold, *Reminiscences of Methodism in West Jersey* (New York, 1849), 166-67.

¹¹Reproductions of these drawings can be found in the Piersen article cited in footnote 3.

Like most preachers of his era, Hoosier appealed directly to the heart in an attempt to convince his listeners of their sins and persuade them that they needed to repent. He was especially famous for his ability to bring his audience to a climactic pitch of emotional tension. It is tempting to attribute his style to his African heritage. Traditional African religions encouraged a wide range of intense emotional expressions. Some recent scholars, however, suggest that this style of preaching was derived from and typical of English and Scottish evangelicals.¹² There is probably truth in both views. Hoosier would have modeled his sermons on the preachers who converted him, but he also made significant contributions to the evangelical style of worship. His years of enslavement must have enabled him to address the hopes and fears of his black audiences with particular poignancy.

Many preachers, both black and white, lacked formal education in those days, so Hoosier's illiteracy probably did not hinder his success. According to one observer, "Harry could remember passages of scripture and quote them accurately; and hymns, also, which he had heard read, he could repeat or sing." When a Methodist bishop tried to teach him to read, Hoosier lost the gift of preaching; so he gave up trying to learn to read. As he explained his talent, "I sing by faith, pray by faith, preach by faith, and do every thing by faith." Hoosier relied on his memory and imagination to produce flowery figures of speech and delivered them with an impressive voice and bold gestures.¹³ He dramatized biblical stories in order to impress upon his listeners the urgency of God's offer of salvation.

Asbury worried about whether Hoosier could handle his fame, and it is difficult to judge whether his worries were a product of racial prejudice. In the fall of 1781, when Asbury was planning a return trip to Virginia, he wrote in his journal, "Harry seems to be unwilling to go with me: I fear his speaking so much to white people in the city has been, or will be, injurious; he has been flattered, and may be ruined."¹⁴ Was Asbury jealous of Hoosier's success? Was he resentful that Hoosier wanted more control over his own ministry? Whatever the case may have been, Hoosier seems to have had a talent for preaching to white audiences. And one is tempted to speculate that, like black preachers of the nineteenth century, he spoke about freedom and justice, doing so in covert ways to avoid provoking antagonism.

One example of Hoosier's experience of racism on the road, where he had to find lodging where he could, shows his resourceful-

¹²Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 249. Butler expressly mentions Harry Hoosier as an example of a black preacher whose emotional style was derived from European examples rather than African influences.

¹³Raybold, *Reminiscences*, 166-67; Richardson, *Dark Salvation*, 181.

¹⁴Asbury, *Journals and Letters*, I, 413 (October 27, 1781).

ness in dealing with prejudice. He once stayed in a house where his hostess declared that “she would not hear the black.” Hoosier heard the remark and retired to the garden for prayer. At the service later that day, he spoke “in the most humble manner” of how all people suffer from sin like a disease and how God has sent a physician to heal sinners. He then lamented the possibility that some might reject the physician God had sent to them that day because his hands were black. The prayer at the end of his sermon was described as “awful, powerful, and overwhelming.” The woman was made aware of her prejudices, as were many others gathered that day.¹⁵

When Thomas Coke (1747–1814) arrived in America in 1784 as Wesley’s representative, Asbury loaned him a horse and assigned Hoosier to assist him. Coke was charmed: “I have now had the pleasure of hearing Harry preach several times. I sometimes give notice immediately after preaching, that in a little time Harry will preach to the blacks; but the whites always stay to hear him. Sometimes I publish him to preach at candle-light, as the Negroes can better attend at that time. I really believe he is one of the best Preachers in the world, there is such an amazing power attends his preaching, though he cannot read; and he is one of the humblest creatures I ever saw.”¹⁶

In 1786, Hoosier accompanied Asbury to New York. In the first reference to Methodist preaching in any New York publication, the *Packet* described Hoosier’s reception:

Lately came to this city a very singular black man, who, it is said, is quite ignorant of letters, yet he has preached in the Methodist church several times to the acceptance of several well-disposed, judicious people. He delivers his discourses with great zeal and pathos, and his language and connection is by no means contemptible. It is the wish of several of our correspondents that this same black man may be so far successful as to rouse the dormant zeal of numbers of our slothful white people, who seem very little affected about concerns of another world.¹⁷

On one occasion in Delaware a large crowd came to hear Asbury preach, and the chapel was so full that many could not get inside. Those standing outside thought they were listening to Asbury and said that, if all Methodist preachers were that good, they would have no reservations in joining the movement. When someone told them that the speaker was not the bishop but his servant, they wondered how good the bishop must be if even his servant was so talented.¹⁸

Beginning in 1789, Hoosier traveled with Freeborn Garrettson (1752–1827), a Methodist preacher who upon conversion freed his

¹⁵Raybold, *Reminiscences*, 167.

¹⁶Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke’s Five Visits to America* (London, 1793), 18.

¹⁷Quoted in Samuel A. Seaman, *Annals of New York Methodism: Being a History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the City of New York from A.D. 1766 to A.D. 1890* (New York, 1892), 92-93.

¹⁸Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, II, 175.

slaves and became an ardent emancipationist. Garrettson was often criticized for preaching against slavery, and his outspoken views must have put Hoosier in a dangerous position. Their views on grace and free will were even more threatening to many in their audiences. Garrettson and Hoosier were often verbally abused and sometimes physically attacked because they denied the Calvinist doctrines of unconditional election and the perseverance of the saints, which were dominant among Protestants at the time. One of Hoosier's favorite biblical texts was the story of the barren fig tree, which Jesus cursed when he found it had nothing but leaves. Hoosier used this story to illustrate the idea that salvation should lead to good works. If Christians did not show the fruit of their faith by striving to be holy, then they could fall from grace and thus risk being cursed by God.

Though Garrettson mentioned that some members of their audiences were rude, for the most part Hoosier was well received. In his journal, Garrettson noted how the people "are amazingly fond of hearing Harry." Garrettson often left Hoosier in charge of the preaching while he attended to other matters. "July 29th, I rode to Hudson, where I found the people very curious to hear Harry. I therefore declined preaching that their curiosity might be satisfied. The different denominations heard him with much admiration, and the Quakers thought that as he was unlearned he must preach by immediate inspiration."¹⁹ In Providence, Garrettson reports, Hoosier preached to more than one thousand people.

Hoosier was on intimate terms with members of the Methodist leadership, but in many ways he remained on the periphery of the church because of his race. He was, thus, both an insider and an outsider. During his lifetime, he saw Methodism undergo a significant transformation. In order to accommodate the growing number of people attracted by its charismatic preachers, the revivalistic movement had to develop institutional and hierarchical structures. Hoosier attended the 1784 meeting in Baltimore known as the "Christmas Conference," where the Methodists, led by Asbury and others, officially separated from the Episcopal Church. Because Harry was black, however, he was not given a public role in that meeting.²⁰

Inevitably, perhaps, the Methodists lost some of their prophetic edge regarding race and class as they matured into one of the dominant institutions in nineteenth-century America. As they became better established, Methodists attracted members from the higher social and economic classes. Consequently, Methodism increasingly

¹⁹Nathan Bangs, *The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson Compiled from his Printed and Manuscript Journals, and other Authentic Documents* (New York, 1839), 188, 195.

²⁰The painting of the event by Thomas Coke Ruckle shows Hoosier peering out from behind the pulpit to observe the ordination of Bishop Asbury (see p. 32). While Richard Allen was also present at the ordination, Hoosier is the only person of color depicted in the painting.

reflected the customs and attitudes of the society at large. A good example of this change can be seen in the shift from holding open-air meetings to constructing church buildings. At an outdoor revival, people of different races could mix freely, but seating arrangements in church pews were more problematic. Those who supported slavery resented sitting next to blacks and worshiping with them on equal terms. The blacks who formerly had been welcomed into the Methodist movement had to decide whether to stay or to form their own churches.

This dilemma is illustrated in the life of Richard Allen (1760–1831), whose career marks a significant departure from Hoosier's. The two men certainly knew one another, since they were the only blacks present at the Christmas Conference, but there is no record of their meeting or having been friends. Like Hoosier, Allen was born a slave. After he became a Methodist in the early 1770s, his master was so impressed with his piety that he was allowed to buy his freedom. Asbury asked Allen to accompany him on preaching trips to the South, but since Asbury did not want him mixing with slaves he suggested that Allen sleep in the carriage rather than in local homes. Allen balked at this proposal. He decided instead to preach in Philadelphia, which had a growing population of freedmen. While Allen was recruiting African Americans into the Methodist movement, white Methodists often discriminated against him, and the breaking point came during a service at the Methodist church where he was a member. After an usher tried to force him to sit in the balcony, Allen withdrew and founded his own church. Outspoken and driven, he was an active abolitionist and a tireless worker for social justice. The churches he influenced eventually became the African Methodist Episcopal Church.²¹

Unlike Allen, Hoosier chose to accept his subordinate role in a Methodist church that was dominated by a white leadership. Hoosier seemed resigned that his popularity did not lead to more recognition or respect. At least publicly he was able to accept the tensions of being both a servant and a preacher, but privately he must have suffered many humiliations. Even the admiration he so often received was frequently mixed with condescension. While Henry Boehm (1775–1875), an itinerant minister, was amazed by Hoosier's abilities—"His voice was musical, and his tongue as the pen of a ready writer"—Boehm also noted that many people doubted that Africa could have produced such a talented man. "Some inquired whether he was really black, or whether Anglo-Saxon blood was not mixed in his veins."²²

When Methodism became an established church, unlicensed itinerant ministers were permitted to seek official ordination. This

²¹Emory Stevens Bucke *et al.*, eds., *The History of American Methodism* (3 vols., New York, 1964), I, 602-603.

²²Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, Of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry*, ed. Joseph B. Wakeley (New York, 1865), 90-91.

allowed a more significant rupture between white and black preachers. There is a record of a petition for Hoosier's ordination to the Methodist bishops' meeting at the Philadelphia Conference of 1805, signed by nineteen preachers, but there is no evidence that he ever achieved this recognition.²³ Given his popularity, it seems reasonable to assume that Hoosier's race deterred his superiors from permitting his ordination. As his career came to a close, Hoosier was required to preach the gospel on an increasingly unequal basis with white ministers.

As a black man traveling on the road and preaching a message of equality before God, Hoosier was subjected to many trials. As early as 1791 he was acquitted in a scandal that involved a certain Sally Lyon, but there is no record of what the charges were.²⁴ Near the end of his life, his situation finally began to take its toll. Hoosier became addicted to wine, which some attributed to "the temptations of extravagant popularity."²⁵ Some cited Hoosier as an example of what happened when a black man became too famous or powerful. Ironically, his duties as a minister gave him the opportunity and the duty to consume wine regularly. Later in the nineteenth century temperance groups persuaded the Methodists and other denominations to substitute grape juice for wine in the communion precisely because they were worried about preachers and lay members alike becoming alcoholics.

Whatever the cause of his decline, Hoosier had the strength of character to break this habit. He soon resumed preaching in Philadelphia, where he was always in high demand. The African Wonder, as he was sometimes called, died in 1806 and "was borne to the grave by a great procession of both white and black admirers, who buried him as a hero, once overcome, but finally victorious."²⁶ He left no descendants.

Working the itinerant trail from New England to the Carolinas, Hoosier played an important role in Methodism's appeal to the unchurched. Much of the movement's early growth came from blacks.

²³Being licensed as an exhorter or local preacher was the first rank in the Methodist ordination process. The next two levels were ordination as a deacon and then as an elder. Blacks were given recognition as local preachers in the last two decades of the 18th century, but they were not eligible to be ordained as deacons until after 1800. See Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 139-40.

The original petition is in the archives of St. George's United Methodist Church, Philadelphia. Hoosier was probably licensed as a local preacher by St. George's Church in the 1780s. The petition for his ordination was for the Deacons' orders. See Grant S. Shockey et al., eds., *Heritage and Hope: The African-American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville, Tenn., 1991), 52. Richard Allen was the first black deacon in the Methodist church, having been ordained by Asbury in 1799.

²⁴Report on Harry Hoosier, Morrell Collection (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, United Library, Evanston, Illinois).

²⁵Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, I, 175.

²⁶*Ibid.*

Indeed, from 1790 to 1810, one fifth of Methodist membership was comprised of African Americans. Hoosier preached to both whites and blacks, and many whites found this integration of the races to be profoundly disturbing. It is probably no coincidence that the derogatory use of the term Hoosier begins to appear at the time of Hoosier's ministry. His congregations were rural and unsophisticated, and they mixed the races, two characteristics that would have prompted hostility and ridicule.

On the Appalachian frontier the term Hoosier became slang for people who were uneducated, so uneducated that they would follow a black minister. Later, as the term migrated west from Virginia and the Carolinas to Tennessee, and then North to Indiana, it came to mean simply someone who was uncouth or ignorant. As Piersen suggests, the greater number of Methodists in Indiana than in southern states helps to explain how the term finally found its home. In the end, the racial connotations were gradually stripped away and lost to history.²⁷

The story of Black Harry Hoosier is worth telling for its own sake, but it also should be an essential part of Indiana lore. More than most ministers of his age, Harry Hoosier was able to transcend racial barriers when he preached. Those who resented his influence used his name to express scorn and derision, but the people of Indiana shook off negative connotations and wore "Hoosier" with pride. Without even knowing it, Indiana has preserved Harry Hoosier's name; it is one that does them honor.

²⁷Hoosier's name has not been forgotten in Methodist circles. For example, Zoar United Methodist in Philadelphia, the oldest continuing black congregation of the United Methodist Church, credits Hoosier as its patron and founder, even though there is no written record of his presence at its opening in 1796.