

Matthew Simpson, the Methodists, and the Defeat of Governor Samuel Bigger, 1843

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The common explanation for the defeat of Governor Samuel Bigger of Indiana in the gubernatorial campaign of 1843 is that he was deserted by the Methodists and the Presbyterians, both of whom were dissatisfied with Henry Clay, cavalier leader of the Whig Party.¹ The explanation is a shrewd guess based upon fact, error, and a rather unsatisfactory hypothesis. Some of the Methodists deserted Bigger, perhaps enough of them to prevent his re-election, but the Presbyterians, at least the New School Presbyterians, were his warm supporters. The defection of the Methodists had little or nothing to do with Henry Clay. It was prompted, rather, by their quarrel with Bigger and the Presbyterians.

The first generation of American Methodists had opposed higher education, but by 1830 they perceived its importance to the retention of their young people and the advance of the church. The Presbyterians of Indiana controlled both the board of trustees and the faculty of Indiana College at Bloomington, which had opened in 1828. In addition, the New School and the Old School factions of the Presbyterian church had established colleges at Wabash and Hanover.² Protesting against the domination of the state university by "one religious sect," the Methodists sought to gain some representation on the board and the faculty. They outnumbered the Presbyterians in the state four to one, and so, in 1834, attempted the stratagem of placing the election of the hitherto self-perpetuating university board in the hands of the legislature. In the angry debate which ensued, a Presbyterian lawyer from Rushville, Samuel Bigger, laughed the Methodists out of court. He doubted their competence to manage a "literary institution." When Ohio University wished to get a Methodist professor, he said, "*They had to send to Europe for him.*"³

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¹ Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana* (3rd ed.; 2 vols., Fort Wayne, 1924), I, 531; J. Wesley Whicker, "Dr. John Evans," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Bloomington, 1905-), XIX (1923), 233-35.

² William Warren Sweet, *Indiana Asbury-DePauw University, 1857-1937* (New York, 1937), 26-29.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

In view of the fact that no Methodist preacher in Indiana was a college graduate, Bigger's contempt was not altogether unfounded. Nor did it seem especially impolitic when, moving to lay the Methodist proposal on the table, he secured the overwhelming support of his fellow legislators.

The Methodists, however, were considerably stirred up over the matter. "Why don't we start a school of our own?" demanded "Indiana Itinerant" in the *Western Christian Advocate*. The Presbyterians of Indiana had 4,000 members, he argued, and controlled three schools, the Methodists 24,000 members and "no voice in any."⁴ After a bitter fight in the legislature, a committee of the Indiana Annual Conference secured a charter and opened a preparatory school at Greencastle. In 1839 the trustees called to the presidency of their new Indiana Asbury University Matthew Simpson, brilliant young vice-president and professor of natural philosophy at Allegheny College. College classes began with the summer term.

Simpson was cheered with the financial prospects of Indiana Asbury. Agents had secured pledges amounting to \$60,000 and confidently expected to increase the amount by another \$20,000 before the fall term opened. The college building was under construction, costs were low, and most of the money raised from pledges could be used to establish a permanent endowment. Before the year was over, however, the financial panic of 1837, which had prostrated the nation, spread to Indiana. The promising subscription to the university shrank until it was scarcely enough to pay for the building. At the end of his first year, Simpson had to report to his trustees a deficit of \$449.02, an indebtedness which by 1843 had increased to \$4,610.26. The board was forced to pay the professors in its own scrip.⁵

Added to the desperate financial struggle was a bitter sectarian rivalry among the church schools. Simpson had quarreled with the Presbyterians before. Suspicious of their motives, he was extremely sensitive to their contempt of Methodist learning. In 1840 the census taker in Putnam

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30, citing article signed "Indiana Itinerant," in *Western Christian Advocate*, January 9, 1835.

⁵ Allen Wiley to Matthew Simpson, May 29, 1839, Bishop Matthew Simpson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Irving Frederic Brown, *Indiana Asbury University, DePauw University: A History* (Greencastle, 1914), 21.

County, a Presbyterian sympathizer, reported simply a grammar school at Greencastle and no college or university. Wabash and Hanover, meanwhile, designated in the census as colleges, received the public documents which Congress had ordered sent to all institutions of higher learning, none of which were sent to Asbury. Simpson angrily reported the incident to his Methodist friends as an example of the "dishonorable and dishonest" conduct of the enemies of the institution.⁶

Much more serious was the favor which Wabash College secured at the hands of the state legislature. In September, 1839, fire destroyed the main building of the New School Presbyterian college at Crawfordsville. Faced with this catastrophe, and unable to raise the money for reconstruction, the authorities began to cast about for a loan. They soon hit upon a happy idea. The state sinking fund, set up to stabilize the banks, was, when the banks had fully repaid their loans, to go to the support of public education. Why should not a small bit of the more than a million dollars in the fund be loaned to Wabash? The college promptly applied to the commissioners of the sinking fund and received a loan of \$8,000 on which interest was to be paid annually, in advance. In two years' time the college, caught in the financial collapse of 1842, was forced to default on its interest payments. Friends of Wabash rushed to the state legislature and secured the passage of a bill which suspended interest payments on the loan from May, 1842, to December 31, 1846.⁷

In the meantime, the Presbyterians further inflamed the suspicions of the Methodists by what seemed to the latter an open attempt to gain control of the common schools and the sinking fund. While the legislature of 1842-43 was in session, Henry Ward Beecher, with the support of Samuel Merrill, James M. Ray, and others, sponsored a convention on education. Beecher was pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis, and Merrill, the president of the State Bank, was the leading layman of his church. Ray, also a Presbyterian, was cashier of the bank. Both Beecher and Merrill were trustees of Wabash College. On the day before the opening of the convention, Beecher, Merrill, and Ray met in

⁶ Matthew Simpson to James M. Grooms, September 22, 1842, Simpson Papers.

⁷ Governor James Whitcomb, Veto Message, January 14, 1847, copy in *ibid.*

secret caucus in the bank, named themselves the principal officers of the convention, and invited the Presbyterian Governor Samuel Bigger to preside over the deliberations. Lacking the foresight to put Simpson on the program, they requested him to address the convention only after his friends had created a considerable disturbance. Simpson promptly declined the tardy invitation and the word went forth among the Methodists that he had been publicly insulted.⁸

Governor Bigger, elected to office in 1840, was the self-same legislator who had spoken so derisively of Methodist educators, a decade earlier. Simpson, chafing over the loan from the state sinking fund to Wabash College and angered by the Presbyterian-management of the convention, began to suspect influence and favoritism in high places. Bigger was the man, Simpson reminded his Methodist friends, who had said there was "not a Methodist in America with sufficient learning to fill a professor's chair."⁹

Simpson's dissatisfaction spread like an irritating rash among the Methodists, but it was catching among the Whigs, too, and soon reached the governor. Alarmed at the prospect of losing Methodist support in the coming summer's campaign for re-election, Bigger called for help. Dr. L. G. Thompson of Ft. Wayne, a prominent Methodist physician, who was also a Whig, brought together Simpson, E. R. Ames, the young missionary secretary of the Methodist Church, S. C. Cooper, Indiana Asbury agent, and himself for a meeting in the governor's office. Simpson repeated his charges and Governor Bigger hotly denied that he had been motivated by contempt, or that he had intended any such derogatory remarks about Methodist educators as had been attributed to him. Scarcely convinced, but unwilling to call the governor a liar, Simpson pledged that he would not repeat the charges. Ames, an ardent Democrat and a skillful politician, looked on with some satisfaction while he began to calculate the political power of the "Amen corner" of the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁰

In the spring of 1843 the Whigs, as expected, nominated

⁸ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 24, 1843, letter signed "Education's Friend"; *ibid.*, August 1, 1843, letter signed "Right of Conscience Man"; L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, July 26, 1843, Simpson Papers.

⁹ Matthew Simpson to James Stryker, July 3, 1843, *ibid.*

¹⁰ S. R. Ball to Matthew Simpson, July 5, 1843, *ibid.*; Sweet, *Indiana Asbury-DePauw University*, 29.

Samuel Bigger for re-election to the governorship. To oppose him, the Democrats named James Whitcomb, a worshipper with and strong supporter of the Methodists. It was generally assumed by the Whigs and conceded by the Democrats that Methodists and Presbyterians alike were predominantly Whigs. In this campaign, however, the Democrats, observing the tenseness of the denominational struggle, saw an opportunity to detonate the charged atmosphere and in the ensuing storm to drive off a large segment of the Methodist vote from the Whig party. The *Indiana State Sentinel*, a Democratic paper published in Indianapolis, opened the campaign with a cleverly conceived rumor that the Whigs were attacking Whitcomb because he was a Methodist. The *Lafayette Advertiser*, also Democratic, confirmed the charges, adding that his being a Methodist ought to be "a recommendation instead of an objection." "What!" exclaimed the *Advertiser* piously, "has it come to that, that a desperate political press shall urge it as an objection to James Whitcomb . . . that he is a Christian!"¹¹

The Whigs, alarmed by this turn of affairs, wheeled out for a replying volley their biggest gun, Noah Noble, former governor of the state and worshipper in Lucien Berry's Methodist chapel in Indianapolis. Noble and others, in an "Appeal to Methodists," published in the Whig *Indiana State Journal*, denied that the Whig press had ever made any such objection to Whitcomb, and called upon the *Sentinel* and the *Advertiser* to produce its evidence. It is a "trick," Noble charged, with some justice, an "attempt to force the church to subserve the interests of one political party."¹²

The *Sentinel*, enjoying its advantage hugely, taunted the Whigs. They were a little late in their efforts to woo the Methodists; moreover, one of the men who signed the Noble letter had been denied membership in the Methodist church. Subtly reviving the anti-Methodist charge against Bigger, the *Sentinel* opined that the "enlightened people" of that denomination were not "to be insulted to their faces by the highest dignitary in the State, and then do the bidding of men, one of whom, at least, has been refused admission to the Methodist church, even on a probationary basis."¹³

¹¹ *Indiana State Journal*, June 27, 1843, citing *Indiana State Sentinel*, n.d., and *Lafayette Advertiser*, n.d. Letter signed by Noah Noble and others.

¹² *Indiana State Journal*, June 27, 1843.

¹³ *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 4, 1843.

Meanwhile, President Simpson, on a speaking tour in southeastern Indiana in behalf of his university, found himself embroiled in the political battle. A literalist on occasion, he adhered strictly to his pledge not to repeat the charges against Governor Bigger. But in his conversations and in his lecture on education he was able to convey, by subtle allusion, the impression that Methodists were "competent" to conduct their own educational interest, notwithstanding the opinion of some who were "high in authority." When men pressed him directly for a statement of his relation to the Governor, he denied any political motivation on his own part, but he repeated the Methodist grievances against Bigger, together with the Governor's insistence that he had not intended his remarks about the Methodists to be interpreted as they were. Some who sat in Simpson's audience, or heard reports of his speeches second hand, thought that his allusions to the Governor were not subtle at all. Ready to magnify the significance of his remarks, or to read into them what he had not said, they reported to Bigger that the president of Indiana Asbury, ostensibly on the circuit to raise money for his college, was actually on an anti-Whig electioneering expedition.¹⁴

The flame burned high in Indianapolis and lighted up the far corners of the state. The editor of the Whig *State Journal* heard from twenty "veritable sources" that Simpson was trying to defeat Bigger. Lucien Berry, pastor of one of the Methodist chapels in Indianapolis, an ardent Whig but a more ardent Methodist, reported, delightedly, that in forty-eight hours there had been scarcely a half hour in which he had not received a visit or a note from some one of the leading Whigs or Democrats, all anxious to know the truth about Governor Bigger, Simpson, and the Methodists.¹⁵

Dr. L. G. Thompson, of Ft. Wayne, reminded Simpson of the interview they had had with the governor in which he understood "the whole business to have been satisfactorily explained & adjusted." Was not that Simpson's understanding? Another Methodist Whig from Brownstown had heard that Governor Bigger had treated Simpson with personal disrespect. He was certain that the story was only rumor, but the kind of rumor that would have an injurious

¹⁴ Matthew Simpson to James Stryker, July 3, 1843, Simpson Papers; L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, July 26, 1843, *ibid.*; Ira Grove to Matthew Simpson, September 15, 1843, *ibid.*

¹⁵ L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, July 26, 1843, *ibid.*

effect upon the "perspects" of the governor; it was a "naked justice" therefore, that the public mind be disabused and that Bigger be relieved of the reproach which had been "inflicted upon him with no sparing hands."¹⁶

Beecher, Ray, Merrill, and Co., were incensed by Simpson's "politicking." They denounced his electioneering tour, they discredited the Bigger stories, they denied that Simpson had been affronted at the educational convention; they affirmed that he had been invited at an early period to address the convention but had refused "in order to create sympathy & make the public believe he was overlooked." Beecher, goaded into an egregious blunder, publicly castigated "P-r-e-s-i-d-e-n-t S-i-m-p-s-o-n" at the Wabash College commencement exercises for his meddling with and attempt to thwart the purpose of the educational convention.¹⁷

A Methodist straightway reported the Beecher incident to the receptive *Sentinel*. The editor of the Whiggish *Journal* hastened to reply. But unhappily he revealed more than the public was supposed to know. Wise Methodists, said the *Journal*, would regard the attempt to visit the supposed sins of Mr. Beecher upon Governor Bigger as "an insult to their sense." Besides, Mr. Beecher, who, of course, would not "notice, in the least degree, an anonymous correspondent," had assured the editor that the tale of his castigation of President Simpson was "false in every sense."¹⁸

Lucien Berry could restrain himself no longer. In an anonymous but cleverly written letter he exposed Beecher, Merrill, and Ray, gave further credence to the rumors about the Governor, and accused the *Journal* of political intrigue. Why did the editor of the *Journal* connect Beecher's insult to President Simpson with the campaign of Governor Bigger? The public knew of no such connection. Was it because the editor knew that Beecher, Merrill, and Ray had met in the bank to elect themselves officers of the convention? Did he mean to insinuate that because the governor "*happened* to be called to preside, therefore, they *all* conspired to insult Simpson, and Cooper, and Ames, and all of the Church, by

¹⁶ S. R. Ball to Matthew Simpson, July 5, 1843, *ibid.*; James Stryker to Matthew Simpson, June 16, 1843, *ibid.*

¹⁷ L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, July 26, 1843, *ibid.*; *Indiana State Sentinel*, July 24, 1843, letter signed "Education's Friend"; *ibid.*, August 1, 1843, letter signed "Right of Conscience Man."

¹⁸ *Indiana State Journal*, July 28, 1843; *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 1, 1843, letter signed "Right of Conscience Man."

forcibly [*sic*] excluding them from any participation?" Furthermore, said Berry, with some sarcasm, he was too well acquainted with Mr. Beecher's "character for veracity" to believe that the said Mr. Beecher had declared the story "false in every sense." Too many men who had heard Beecher at Crawfordsville were willing to say that the story was "TRUE IN NEARLY EVERY SENSE."¹⁹

Democrats intrigued with Methodists to get the Beecher speech published. An excited Whig dared the Methodists "to vote against us." "If they do," he threatened, "THE WHIG PARTY WILL BLOW THEIR COLLEGE AND CHURCH TO HELL."²⁰

Simpson's personal interest in the campaign was quickened also by the political activities of two of his friends, Joseph A. Wright and Dr. John Evans. Wright, a member of the state legislature and a trustee of Indiana Asbury, was a candidate for the United States Congress in the seventh district. Dr. Evans, a physician, having vainly tried to secure Bigger's support for reform measures, particularly in the care of the insane, was directing a Whig revolt against the governor in Fountain County.

The election was held in mid-August. Out of a total of 110,000 votes, Whitcomb won over Bigger by the narrow margin of 2,000. It was the first Democratic victory in over a decade. In Fountain County, where Dr. Evans, a Whig, had campaigned against his own party, Whitcomb led his opponent by a decisive majority. In the seventh district Joseph Wright squeaked through to Congress by a majority of but three votes.²¹

The *Indiana Whig* charged the Methodists with voting "almost to a man" against Bigger,²² and the *Bloomington Post* warned the Methodists to "look well to the safety" of their college. An "insulted and exasperated" public would wreak its vengeance upon an institution whose "holy head" would condescend to go through the country "making political speeches in behalf of so base a hypocrite as *James Whitcomb*."²³

¹⁹ *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 1, 1843, letter signed "Right of Conscience Man."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, August 1, 1843, "A Sick Whig."

²¹ *Ibid.*, September 5, 1843.

²² *Ibid.*, September 12, 1843, citing *Indiana Whig* and *New Albany Democrat*, n.d.

²³ *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 22, 1843, citing *Bloomington Post*, n.d.

The Greencastle *Western Visiter* pronounced the *Post* charges "false in toto," and "a base and ungentlemanly attack upon President Simpson." Bigger, the *Visiter* pointed out, had done better in Greencastle than had the Methodist Whig candidate for Congress.²⁴ The editor of the *Indiana State Journal*, who shrewdly perceived that the Methodists must not be permanently alienated from the Whig Party, likewise repudiated the charges of the *Post*. The Locofocos might have kept a few Methodists from voting for Bigger, he wrote, but an analysis of the returns would show that Whitcomb had received some 6,000 votes fewer than the electorate had given Bigger in 1840. The trouble was that the "slumbering mass" of Whigs had stayed at home, not bothering to vote.²⁵

That winter, when the legislature convened, the Senate committee on education was "pleased" to invite President Simpson to deliver a "public address" on the subject of education, an invitation which he accepted. In January, a Methodist member of the Whig nominating committee proposed Simpson for a place on the Whig electoral ticket, an honor which he declined.²⁶ When James Whitcomb took over his gubernatorial duties he promptly recommended the establishment of a hospital for the insane, named Dr. Evans as the first superintendent, and appointed Simpson to the board of directors of a proposed school for the deaf and dumb.

In due time, Joseph A. Wright took up his duties at Washington, D. C. When Simpson and Berry importuned him to use his influence with President John Tyler to give his support to Samuel Henderson (who had so warmly "espoused the cause of Methodism *versus* Bigger") for the Indianapolis postmastership, Wright happily complied, and in a short time was able to report that the President had sent Henderson's name to the Senate for confirmation.²⁷ The Methodists were doing well in Indiana politics.

The matter which had precipitated the whole struggle, the Wabash College loan from the sinking fund, had not, however, been finally settled. The grace period extended to December, 1846, which marked the first convening of the

²⁴ Greencastle *Western Visiter*, August 24, 1843.

²⁵ *Indiana State Journal*, August 23, 1843.

²⁶ W. T. S. Cornell to Matthew Simpson, December 27, 1843, Simpson Papers; L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, January 29, 1844, *ibid.*

²⁷ L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, January 10, 1844, *ibid.*; Joseph A. Wright to Matthew Simpson, February 7, March 23, 1844, *ibid.*

legislature after Whitcomb's second successful gubernatorial campaign. With Whitcomb re-elected and political affairs settled, friends of Wabash College in the legislature brought in a bill to write off the college's indebtedness, now grown to \$10,600. The college, in lieu of payment of the debt, would surrender bonds (which were worthless) and in addition would give five years' free instruction to some one hundred young men, one from each county, who wished to become common school teachers.²⁸

Berry, in accordance with Methodist practice, had been sent on to another station, but the Rev. John Bayless, his successor at Indianapolis, was quite as concerned about Methodist interests. Alarmed at the prospect of establishing all over the state one hundred "preparatory departments" for Wabash (such an advantage as he would give ten years labor to secure for Asbury), he begged Simpson to come to Indianapolis "without delay."²⁹

Simpson and Ames (of whom it was said, he "rules the governor") hurried over to the capital to try to defeat the bill. As a counter measure, Simpson hastily drafted a petition to the legislature for a loan of \$10,000 to Indiana Asbury University for a period of ten years. In lieu of interest, Asbury would, for the period of the loan, educate, free of tuition, common school teachers for each of the counties of the state. By way of justification, Simpson set forth the financial plight of the institution, and demanded that the legislature act justly and impartially in its relation to the several colleges.³⁰

For the moment the strategy worked. It was whispered about that Simpson had taught Bigger a lesson and that he would "learn" the legislature another that it would not soon forget. The legislature, however, defiantly passed the Wabash bill while it made short shrift of Simpson's proposal. The Methodists still took comfort in the rumor which was current, "on good authority," that Governor Whitcomb would veto the bill. The rumors were correct. The governor vetoed it and there was loud talk about the "influence" which was brought to bear upon him, and murmurs about the Bigger

²⁸ James Whitcomb, Veto Message, January 14, 1847, copy in *ibid.*

²⁹ J. S. Bayless to Matthew Simpson, December 28, 1846, *ibid.*

³⁰ L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, March 31, 1847, *ibid.*; memorandum entitled, "An Act to loan funds to the Indiana Asbury University," *ibid.*

affair. The Methodists were jubilant, but the "visage of Mr. Beecher . . . was gastly [*sic*]." ³¹

It was not long before the blood returned to Mr. Beecher's face. The wily governor had vetoed the bill, but he held his veto until the last moment allotted to him by law; it arrived at the legislature at a doubtful hour and the Senate refused to accept it. Thus the "iniquitous Wabash College Bill" became law. ³²

Berry, from his new post at Oxford, Ohio, was furious with the legislature and not a little surprised that Simpson, Ames, and Bayless "did not possess sufficient skill" to defeat the New School Presbyterians. He could find only one consoling thought in the transaction: The next common school convention, he was sure, would recommend the appointment of a state superintendent of public instruction. The legislature, after having "petted and favored" the New School Presbyterians, would not dare deny the Methodists the superintendency. The Methodists must not take a chance, however; they must go up to the next convention in such numbers that the Presbyterians could not run over them with impunity. If the Methodists could get the superintendency, the Presbyterians could have their \$10,000, for then the church of Wesley and Asbury would, after all, "take the lead in the work of Education and place our University where it Should be." ³³

Berry was wrong in the details but right in the results. Five years later when the state of Indiana was ready to name its first superintendent of public instruction, it elected to the office William C. Larrabee, Methodist preacher, and professor of mathematics at Indiana Asbury University.

³¹ S. T. Gillet to Matthew Simpson, January 14, 1847, *ibid.*; A. W. Harrison to Matthew Simpson, January 15, 1847, *ibid.*

³² L. W. Berry to Matthew Simpson, March 31, 1847, *ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*