



Barbara Heck

1734 – 1804

Two brass candlesticks sit on two small tables flanking the pulpit chair in John Street Methodist Church, New York City. The candlesticks belonged to Barbara Heck. She brought them every Sunday to the early worship service. They are lit at every service in the church today. The lamp that she herself was has not been hidden under a bushel.

Barbara Von Ruckle was born in County Limerick, Ireland, to parents whose Protestant forebears had fled persecution in Germany. French soldiers under King Louis XIV had pillaged the southern part of Germany, harassing all who clung to the truths of the Reformation. The beleaguered people scattered.

In 1709 a group of 110 families fled as far as Rotterdam, where the ocean frustrated their escape attempt. Pitying their plight, Queen Anne of England dispatched British ships to the Dutch seaport to save the refugees. The grateful people were set down in County Limerick. The government eased them into their new lives by paying rent on the land which they would farm for the next two decades.

The recently arrived German refugees quickly demonstrated their superiority to the native Irish peasants in all aspects of agriculture. Resentment mounted. Rents were raised 600 percent. John Wesley (who made twenty-two trips to Ireland) was aghast when he visited the German-speaking colony and witnessed the manner in which the refugees had been penalized for their industry. He wrote in his

Journal, "I stand amazed! Have landlords no common sense (whether they have common humanity or no) that they will suffer such as these to be starved away from them?"

Wesley also noted that these people were starving for the bread of life as well. He observed that in the fifty years since they had left Germany they had become "eminent for drunkenness, cursing, swearing and utter neglect of religion." He attributed their downward slide to the fact that for fifty years they had been without a German-speaking pastor. Wesley himself, however, was fluent in German, and was overjoyed to see the Methodist articulation of the gospel seize the people and change them profoundly.

At age eighteen Barbara had publicly professed her faith in Jesus Christ. When Wesley visited the Emerald Isle several years later the two of them resonated. The distinctive emphases of Methodism, rooted in Barbara, would eventually be transplanted to the soil of the New World.

The gentry in Ireland continued their persecution, confiscating the pasture land which the German refugees held in common. Deprived of land and afflicted with unpayable taxes, many decided to emigrate to America. Barbara married Paul Hescht (the name was anglicized to "Heck"), and together they braved a sixty-three day trip to New York City.

New York City, in 1760, was populated with 14,000 Dutch, English, German, Spanish and Afro-Americans. The city's spiritual carelessness startled Barbara, as did a similar carelessness in the members of her extended family (cousins, in-laws, distant relatives) who had emigrated with her. She pleaded with her cousin, Philip Embury, to preach. He maintained that he couldn't, inasmuch as he had neither church nor congregation. "Preach in your own home, and I will gather a congregation," Barbara replied.

The mustard seed congregation began with only four people: Barbara, her husband, a labourer, and a black female servant. They persevered. Just when it seemed the mustard seed would never germinate and multiply, Captain Thomas Webb appeared. He was regimental commander of the British forces at Albany. Standing erect in his military bearing, attired in the famous redcoat, Webb preached and the congregation grew. (In addition to his redcoat Webb also wore a green patch over one eye. He had been wounded at the Battle of the Plains

of Abraham, when Quebec fell to the British.)

Soon the private home was overcrowded; the congregation needed a church building. Barbara herself designed it, the first Methodist church building in the New World. At the service of dedication the preacher expounded Hosea 10:12:

*Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of steadfast love;
break up your fallow ground,
for it is time to seek the Lord.*

This building was soon outgrown, and in 1768 another was raised in New York City. The seats had no backs, and the gallery was reached by means of a ladder. Hundreds thronged it every Sunday.

When the American War of Independence loomed, Barbara left New York City with her husband and their five children and moved to a farm in Camden, near Lake Champlain. Angry neighbours who supported the coming revolution burned them out, destroying their livestock and forcing them off their land. Once again the Heck family moved, this time to the Montreal area. A few years later they settled in the area of what would eventually become Brockville. Compared to New York City their new habitat was a wilderness. Undaunted, Barbara commenced her mustard seed sowing all over again. It took years to gather enough people to form the first Methodist "class" in Canada. The people she brought together had to minister to each other for five years; only then did a circuit-riding, saddlebag preacher arrive to lead them.

When she was seventy years old one of her three sons found Barbara sitting in her chair, her German Bible open on her lap. The woman who had never spoken English well, yet who was the mother of English Methodism in Canada, had gone home.

