

REV. GEORGE LANE—GOOD “GIFTS,” MUCH “GRACE,” AND MARKED “USEFULNESS”



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This essay was among several included in this volume that were originally published in BYU Studies 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969).

Many of the personalities who touched early Mormonism have drifted into comparative obscurity, their initial roles ill remembered or undefined. Such has been the lot of the Methodist Episcopal Church minister the Reverend George Lane (1784–1859), a figure who, according to certain accounts, was one of those instrumental in moving Joseph Smith to make his epic inquiry of the Lord with the attendant vision of the Father and Son. The renewed research on Mormon origins has generated interest in Lane’s activities and his contact with Joseph Smith. This new interest has pointed out how very little we know of the Reverend George Lane, which has motivated this study of the man and his relationship to Mormonism.

The writer enjoyed conducting original research in the area concerned here during the summer of 1968 and searching for the

records that yielded the information contained in this article. The experience was made doubly enjoyable by the excellent assistance of Ralph Hazeltine, director of the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; Luke A. Sarsfield, a doctoral candidate doing research at the society; Harrison Harvey Smith, editor of the *Wilkes-Barre Record* and a descendant of Sarah Harvey Lane, first wife of the Reverend George Lane; and Miss Marion Disque, Wyoming Seminary, Kingston, Pennsylvania. Each of these perceptive individuals generously shared information and materials helpful to this project.

George Lane was born near Kingston, Ulster County, New York, on April 13, 1784.¹ His birth apparently occurred “not far from the Hudson, after his parents set off from Massachusetts for the wilds of Susquehanna.”² He was the sixth child of Nathan Lane (b. Attleboro, Massachusetts, March 20, 1750; d. Lanesboro, Pennsylvania, March 17, 1817) and Dorcas Muscroft (b. March 1, 1751; md. 1772; d. September 8, 1839).³ His brothers and sisters were Daniel, Irene, Betsey, Nathan, David, Asa, Charles, and Dorcas.⁴

Lane’s father remained for a short time in Ulster County and then moved to Broome County, New York, where he enjoyed the distinction of being the first white settler in Onaquaga, Windsor Township.⁵ Similarly, he became the first town supervisor and erected the first gristmill in the area in about 1797. His sons, Nathan Jr. and David, were still listed as residents in the 1820 census.⁶

George Peck, a fellow preacher and intimate of George Lane, describes the circumstances of his friend’s youth in these terms:

The early history of George Lane was marked by the toils, hardships, and exposure common to the life of a boy in a new country. The simple food, often deficient in quantity, and few of the means and appliances of intellectual improvement. In those disadvantages

our subject shared a common lot with his fellows. The Puritan morals, piety, books, and reading of his excellent mother exerted a strong moral influence upon his mind while very young.⁷

Early in the nineteenth century, the Lanes settled in what is now Harmony Township, Susquehanna (then Luzerne) County, Pennsylvania, “at a place which was afterwards called Lane’s Mills, or Lanesville, and is now Lanesboro. This is in the territory which was known as the ‘Wyoming region,’ and was claimed by the Connecticut Susquehanna Company.”⁸ It is not certain whether George went to Harmony Township with his family at the time of their removal. He may have taken up “school-keeping” at this juncture. While in Windsor Township, he had attended school in the settlement of Windsor, New York, where he made “good proficiency” studying his spelling book, reading book, and arithmetic. His highest ambition, subsequently, was to be a schoolteacher, a person much in demand in the new settlements. In the summer of 1802, he was engaged to teach by Putnam Catlin, Esq., at Great Bend (Pennsylvania). During the winter of 1802–3, he taught in the vicinity of where the community of Kirkwood, New York, is presently located. It was here that George Lane joined the Methodist Episcopal Church. An account of his conversion has been preserved by Rev. William Round:

Mrs. Moore, of Kirkwood, says that she experienced religion and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church while George Lane was teaching school near where Kirkwood now stands in 1803. Brother Lane experienced religion himself during that winter. He was absent from the school a few days, and when he returned he told his scholars that he had experienced religion, and exhorted them and prayed with them, and a great revival broke out immediately.⁹

Lane was apparently “awakened” through the preaching of James Herron and was received into the church by Samuel

Budd.¹⁰ Lane reacted favorably toward his religious experience, and “the fervor of his spirit, and his gifts in prayer and exhortation, soon indicated that he was a chosen vessel, destined to be heard at the division of God’s sacramental host, then doing battle valiantly upon the frontiers.”¹¹

In 1804, George Lane was employed by the presiding elder of the Genesee District as an assistant preacher on the Tioga circuit.¹² The following year he was admitted on trial in the Philadelphia Conference and appointed to the Scipio circuit (New York) with Johnson Dunham.¹³ “The circuit was characterized by what was nothing very peculiar for those times, poverty, bad roads, long rides, small congregations, and a sad deficiency of all the comforts of life. Here he found hospitality, and here God gave him seals to his ministry.”¹⁴ As an indication of the tremendous distances traveled by this pair of itinerants, the Scipio circuit was six hundred miles in circumference.¹⁵

Lane remained on trial in 1806 and was appointed by the Philadelphia Conference to the Pompey circuit (New York) with Benjamin Bidlack. “Here also he labored hard and was blessed with fruit.”¹⁶ In 1807, he was admitted into “full connexion” and ordained a deacon by Bishop Francis Asbury.¹⁷ His appointment was to the Accomac circuit on the eastern shore of Virginia: “Here he labored as he was able, amid death-camps, for the salvation of the poor slaves and their masters, and was happy in witnessing the conversation of many of the poor degraded and downtrodden sons of Ham, and their union with the Church of Christ.”¹⁸

George Lane was continued as a deacon in 1808 and assigned to the Holland Purchase Mission with Thomas Elliott. Their mission included all of New York State west of Canandaigua and extended along Lake Erie into Pennsylvania. In this unsettled area, Lane was often compelled to travel thirty to forty miles without seeing a house, and he frequently suffered from

A MAN OF INTEGRITY

When I arrived in Pennsylvania back in 1968 and went to Wilkes-Barre, I had been alerted to be on the watch for records related to Rev. George Lane, a Methodist Episcopal minister in the early nineteenth century. Rev. Wesley P. Walters of the Presbyterian Church had recently published on the subject of Palmyra revivals and determined that Joseph Smith's First Vision really did not occur in 1820 and that there were no revivals in the Palmyra area during that time. It was likewise expressed that Rev. George Lane would not have ventured so far out of the Susquehanna District, where he served as presiding elder, to participate in such an alleged revival. Rather it was averred that he would have remained down in northeastern Pennsylvania and the southern tier of New York. I was invited to find out all I could about Rev. George Lane, so I went to the historical society in Wilkes-Barre. The director, Ralph Hazeltine, sent me in two directions. First of all, he said, "You ought to visit George Lane's final resting place. He's buried up in the Hollenback cemetery." The second place he directed me to was the Wyoming Seminary at Kingston, which was across the Susquehanna River from Wilkes-Barre, an old bastion of the Genesee Conference and a training ground for the ministry.

I went over to the Wyoming Seminary library, where I talked to the curator. I said I would like very much to see the Genesee Conference minutes in the old record book and wished also to gather certain information about some of the early Methodist ministers who were part of that conference. The curator said to me, "You need to go see the food services administrator." I thought he didn't hear me correctly, so I repeated what I had just said, but he said, "No, you really need to go over to the cafeteria." So I went over. The food services administrator's name was Miss Marian Disque. She got a ring of keys, and we walked down a long, dark hall. As she opened the door and turned on the light, I felt like I had stepped into a time warp. It was a museum for the old Genesee Methodist Conference. Before me were the saddles, the saddle bags, the hats, and the surtout coats, the outer coat that ministers wore in that period. And there were the minutes of the Genesee Conference, a copy of them, and a host of other documents including publications by the ministers. I couldn't believe my good fortune. At the end of the day, Marian came back and said, "I see you're interested." I said, "By all means." And she said, "If there's anything here that you would like to take back to your hotel room, please feel free to do so." She also said, "If there's anything there that you want to

copy, the Ousterhout Library has a very fine Xerox machine.” Well, that night I busted the copier making so many copies, and it’s probably fortunate that I was able to make copies of certain records because in 1972 the Susquehanna overflowed its banks, and that basement room filled with water. It destroyed much, if not all, of the materials there. I found out later as I went to the courthouse at Wilkes-Barre that that same flood also got many of the old court records associated with the county itself. The documents that I had been able to copy at Kingston have proven invaluable to me over the years. From the minutes of the Genesee Conference, I could tell where Rev. George Lane was at conference time and where his assignments took him in the interim. I found out that he was involved in the camp meetings near Joseph’s own Palmyra home when the annual conference was held at Vienna (later Phelps), Ontario County, New York, in 1819, and that he passed in the general vicinity of Palmyra to the south, preaching on his way, as he traveled to the annual Genesee Conference at Lundy’s Lane, Upper Canada, in 1820.

As a historian, you try to investigate all of the documents and gather all of the evidence that you can find. In the process of examining the life experience of Joseph Smith at considerable length, I am completely satisfied that he was indeed the designated Prophet of the Restoration and was about his Father’s business. I have been satisfied that Joseph Smith was speaking the truth concerning his revelatory experiences with the heavens. The historical documents that I have pieced together tell me that I am dealing with a man of integrity and that he accomplished the tasks which he has described. Many historians believe that the certainty of the evidence has to be tangible and cannot come from the spiritual realm. However, I can say, “Thank you, Lord, for the knowledge that I have from the available documents and from the confirmation of the Spirit that Joseph Smith was who he said he was, that he did what he said he did, and that he was a servant of the living God.” Relative to his First Vision experience, he was stirred by the revivalist preaching in his neighborhood and directed by the Spirit of the Lord as he went out, knelt down, and offered up his prayer to God in the grove. Again, you can’t necessarily measure Joseph’s woodland theophany in terms of what documents you find in a library or courthouse, but you can measure the effects of that divine manifestation on yourself as witnessed by the Spirit. Joseph’s humble prayer of faith was answered as the Father and the Son appeared before him in the early spring of 1820. (Larry C. Porter, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 30, 2009, Provo, UT)

hunger and cold.¹⁹ While laboring under these conditions, Lane conducted the first camp meeting west of the Genesee River. This gathering was held in Caledonia, now Wheatland. As a result of this and other endeavors, he was able to report the activity of some ninety members.²⁰

George Peck, in his biographical sketch of Lane, details for his readers the difficulties experienced by the itinerant in the Holland Purchase Mission during that eventful year of 1808. Of equal value to the researcher is Peck's preface to the account of those difficulties when he states, "The following extract from Mr. Lane's diary has been furnished us by his excellent lady [Lydia Bunting Lane, second wife of George Lane], and will give the reader a good idea of his labors and dangers on this new field, and the spirit in which he bore himself under them."²¹ From this communication it becomes obvious that Lane maintained a diary of at least a part of his early ministry and that it was apparently available for reference as late as 1860 (the publication date of Peck's treatise). I have been unable to locate that diary or to determine whether there was another diary for the 1820s.

Bishop William M'Kendree ordained George Lane an elder in the Methodist Church in 1809.²² Lane was appointed by the Philadelphia Conference to the Wyoming circuit (Pennsylvania), serving with Abraham Dawson. These ministers conducted the first camp meeting in Luzerne County, holding the event near the village of Wyoming. A graphic account of the proceedings has been recorded:

A rough board stand was constructed, which was occupied by the preachers during Divine service, and a circle of tents was formed round about, composed of wagon and bed covers stretched over hooped saplings. The floors of the tents were the bare ground concealed by a sprinkling of straw, while the beautiful green foliage of the forest was spread out above them. Multitudes of people collected from far and near, attracted, many by novelty, and some by

a desire to do good and to get good. . . . The tremendous emotions of the speaker were communicated to his audience, and an excitement was produced of which we in this day can have but a faint conception. The cries of the penitent, and the shouts of rejoicing Christians, mingled with the deep tones of the preacher, produced a marked effect even on the most obdurate infidel.²³

On July 20, 1810, the Genesee Conference, newly formed by a division of the Philadelphia Conference, held its inaugural gathering at Lyons, New York. The *Journal of the Genesee Conference* for July 23, 1810, specifies that Rev. George Lane was officially located as of that date.²⁴ Broken in health, because of his “former toils and exposure,” he found himself under the necessity of retiring, for a season, from the itinerancy.²⁵ According to the records of the old *Steward’s Book* of the Wyoming circuit, Lane had, in fact, located shortly after the quarterly meeting in December 1809. The account indicates that in March 1810 Samuel Carver received traveling expenses and one-fourth salary for one quarter of Lane’s stead. From March to July 1810, Loring Grant traveled the Wyoming circuit in place of George Lane.²⁶

Among the active adherents to the Methodist faith on the Wyoming circuit was Miss Sarah Harvey of Plymouth Township, daughter of Elisha and Rosanna (Jameson) Harvey. Evidence of Sarah’s interest in religious matters is indicated by a remembrance from 1808:

The stone church at Brier Creek was the rallying point for the Methodist people from Milton, Lewisburgh, Northumberland, Wyoming Valley and surrounding country. At the quarterly meetings, held at Christian and Thomas Bowman’s, before the church was built, people came thirty-five miles, men and women, on horseback. From Wyoming Valley: Ann Denison, Sarah Brown, Sarah Harvey (afterward wife of Rev. George Lane), Eunice

Wakeman, niece of Mrs. Joseph Wright, a young woman of extraordinary mind and talents.²⁷

While serving the Wyoming circuit, Lane became acquainted with Sarah and the couple were married at Plymouth, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, on May 31, 1810. Six children were born to this union: Sally Ann, Harvey Bradburn, George Washington, Charles Asbury, Mary Butler, and Joseph Jameson.²⁸ Harvey Bradburn became professor of languages at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, and a New York businessman.²⁹ George Washington was a licensed minister for the Methodist Church in Georgia and was subsequently called to the chair of ancient languages at Emory College, Oxford, Georgia.³⁰ Joseph Jameson became a minister of the Methodist Church and a teacher.³¹

When George Lane withdrew from the itinerancy, he entered the mercantile business in partnership with his youngest brother, Charles. They purchased a stock of general merchandise from Joseph Wright and set up operation in the storeroom formerly occupied by Mr. Wright at the lower end of the village of Plymouth. This partnership was dissolved by mutual consent on September 21, 1812, and George Lane continued alone until the early part of 1814, when Benjamin Harvey, his brother-in-law and clerk in the store, joined him as a partner. They then moved from the Wright storeroom "to a building which stood where Smith's Opera House now stands in Plymouth."³² In October 1814, a second store was opened in Wilkes-Barre:

The firm of Lane and Harvey opened a store "with a general assortment of goods suitable to the season," in Wilkesbarre at the stand formerly occupied by J. and W. Barnes, on north side of the Public Square, near the corner of West Market street, on land now covered by the large department store of Jonas Long's sons. Mr. Lane, having erected a dwelling-house between the store building and the

corner, occupied it with his family and managed the Wilkes-barre store, while Mr. Harvey took charge of the business at Plymouth. At these two stores business was carried on until April, 1816, when, the partnership having been dissolved, the store at Plymouth was closed, and Mr. Lane became sole owner of the Wilkesbarre establishment.³³

Lane was collector of taxes for Plymouth Township in 1813, and in 1818 he was elected treasurer of the Wilkes-Barre Bridge Company.³⁴ He became a stockholder in that company, originally having twenty shares of stock which increased to forty by 1824.³⁵

Despite his retirement from the itinerancy, Lane did not divorce himself from certain ministerial performances. He continued to preach occasionally and was called upon to address various congregations in Wilkes-Barre and surrounding communities. He also assisted other ministers: "In his house the preachers ever found a pleasant home, and in him a true friend and wise counselor."³⁶

In 1818, George Lane participated in a camp meeting conducted in the mountains west of the valley. At the close of the gathering, and as the caravan was moving down the mountain, one Betsey Myers, pricked in her heart, "alighted from the wagon and fell upon her knees in the shade of a clump of oak and pine shrubs by the side of the road, crying, 'God have mercy upon me a poor wicked sinner!' The way was soon blocked up. The whole train was arrested, and the attention of all was attracted to a little group of young ladies."³⁷ For several hours the impromptu camp meeting proceeded while the cries of the penitents were followed by shouts of deliverance. Following this event, a strong religious influence pervaded the entire charge. Unfortunately, the preachers on the local and district levels were obliged to attend the annual Genesee Conference at Lansing, Cayuga County, New York, on July 16,

1818, and were unable to meet the demands for assistance created by “the little camp-meeting.” However, Lane and other local preachers came to their aid:

The cause was in good hands. The Rev. George Lane, who had rendered good service at the camp-meeting, and had been present and deeply interested at the wayside meeting, took charge of the work while the preachers were at conference. He was then a local preacher and resided in Wilkes-barre. “Father Bidlack” and “Brother Lane” did the preaching, while Darius Williams managed the prayer-meetings. Influential families became interested in the revival and were identified with the Methodist Episcopal Church. Mr. Lane took the names of those who wished to join the society and reported them to the preacher after conference.³⁸

His health restored, and anxious to associate once again with the active ministry, Lane sold his stock at the Wilkes-Barre store in March 1819³⁹ and reentered the itinerancy. On Thursday, July 1, 1819, he was in attendance as the annual Genesee Conference convened in Vienna (afterwards Phelps), Ontario County, New York. The following day, Friday, July 2, at “9 o’clock AM. Conference met. George Lane, Gideon Draper, Wm. Snow and Thomas Wright were again received into the traveling connexion.”⁴⁰

The conference was in session over a period of eight days, July 1 to July 8, 1819. Abel Stevens gives us some appreciation of the general pattern which evolved at such conferences of the Methodist Church:

These annual assemblies became imposing occasions. A bishop presided; the preachers from many miles around, usually including several states, were present; hosts of laymen were spectators. There was preaching in the early morning, in the afternoon, and at night. The daily proceedings were introduced with religious services, and were characterized by an impressive religious spirit. They continued usually a week, and it was a festal season, gathering

the war-worn heroes of many distant and hard-fought fields, renewing the intimacies of preachers and people, and crowned alike by social hospitalities and joyous devotions.⁴¹

The presence of some 110 ministers and their bishop, R. R. Roberts, at the Genesee Conference meetings, representing the New York, Pennsylvania, and Upper and Lower Canada districts, must have created at least a moderate stir in the immediate neighborhood.⁴² This places Rev. George Lane within fifteen miles of Manchester, attending the largest Methodist meeting of the year in western New York, among a great number of Methodist ministers, at a time when Joseph Smith was aware of “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion” occurring “some time in the second year [1819] after our removal to Manchester” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). At this time the Smiths were actually still living in Palmyra Township, not Manchester.

Whether or not Joseph attended some of these meetings cannot be determined from any records presently available, but the opportunity cannot be denied—if only to sell confectionaries.⁴³ To think that the Smiths would not have heard of the gathering is hardly believable.

Lane was appointed Presiding Elder of the Susquehanna District at the conference. He was so named because he was one “who incessantly travels his extensive territory, preaching, counseling the traveling and Local Preachers and Exhorters, meeting the official members of the circuit Societies, and promoting the interest of the Church in every possible way.”⁴⁴ The circuits which comprised the Susquehanna District in 1819 were the Bald Eagle, Lycoming, Shamoking, Northumberland, Wyoming, Canaan, Bridgewater, Wyalusing, Tioga, and Wayne.⁴⁵ The following year, 1820, the Broome circuit was placed under Lane’s jurisdiction.⁴⁶

Lane’s geographical assignment prompts some interesting speculation relative to his possible acquaintance with certain



Emma Hale, who became Joseph Smith's wife and whose family was devoutly Methodist. Reverend Lane probably became acquainted with the Hale family and other individuals who became prominent in Mormonism. (Lee Greene Richards, Emma Hale Smith, © 1941 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

individuals who were later to become principals in the advent of Mormonism. Living within the confines of the district at Harmony, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, immediately west of the community of Oakland on the Susquehanna River, were Isaac Hale, his wife, Elizabeth, and their nine children, among whom was Emma, future wife of Joseph Smith. The Hale family was devoutly Methodist, Isaac and Elizabeth being numbered among the members of the first class conducted at Lanesboro, Pennsylvania, some two miles east of their Harmony home: "The first class at Lanesboro was formed in 1810 by Mr. Grant, or in 1812 by Bro. King. It included John and Phoebe Gildersleeve Comfort, Isaac and Elizabeth Hale, Nathaniel and Sarah Lewis, Marmaduke and Clarisa Salsbury,

and James Newman and Betsey Rouse; and if not at first, soon after, Mary Hilborn.”⁴⁷

The preachers on the Broome circuit in 1816 found a cordial reception at the Hale home, and one of their appointments was in a little log schoolhouse near the Hale homestead, “to a small but earnest congregation.”⁴⁸ In the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, the content of an affidavit asserts that “Father Hale’s house was the preacher’s home.”⁴⁹ Under these circumstances, it is a distinct possibility that Lane, in his capacity of “meeting the official members of the circuit societies,” may well have known the Hale family. The prospect is heightened when we recall that George Lane grew up in Windsor Township, Broome County, New York, at a location some ten miles north of the Hales’ place, and that his parents, Nathan and Dorcus Lane, lived for many years at Lanesboro, Pennsylvania, within a few miles of Isaac and Elizabeth Hale.

Lane would most assuredly have been acquainted with Isaac Hale’s brother-in-law, Nathaniel Lewis. Nathaniel had married Sarah Hale and lived just across the Susquehanna River from Isaac. He was a deacon in the Methodist faith, having been ordained by Bishop Asbury on July 12, 1807.⁵⁰ “Nathaniel Lewis, an ordained local preacher, was deeply pious, shrewd, witty, and at home in the rough-and-tumble polemics of the time. He preached and formed classes at Jackson, Thompson, Starruca, and other places.”⁵¹ Lewis was one of those who strenuously challenged the validity of Joseph Smith’s claims. He was still preaching in that vicinity as late as 1835, prior to moving west.⁵²

On September 13, 1819, Rev. George Lane and Marmaduke Pierce preached with telling effect at a camp meeting held at Carpenter’s Notch, Wyoming circuit. From the account, we derive some feeling for Lane’s persuasive abilities from the stand:

Marmaduke Pierce preached a short but mighty sermon, and closed with a perfect storm. He addressed the wicked with tremendous power, and then, exclaiming, “I feel the Spirit of God

upon me, Glory, halleluiah!” dropped down upon the seat behind him, shouting, weeping, laughing, wonderfully moved. The joyous responses from the preachers and the assemblage arose like the sound of many waters, while the whole congregation shook like the forest in mighty wind. The exhortations of the presiding elder, George Lane, were overwhelming. Sinners quailed under them, and many cried aloud for mercy. The meeting included the Sabbath, and continued about a week. Sixty persons professed to find peace, and thirty joined the church.⁵³

The 1820 annual Genesee Conference convened at Lundy’s Lane, Niagara, Upper Canada, on Thursday, July 20, 1820. Rev. George Lane was present at the gathering and on July 24 was examined and “passed.”⁵⁴ Lane was an active participant in the proceedings of the conference, being named to at least two committees. In the first instance, July 20, he was elected to a three-man “committee of temporalities” with Abner Chase and Charles Giles.⁵⁵ George Lane reported to the conference the findings of that committee via the following resolutions:

Resolved 1st. That this Conference highly disapproved of the departure of some of its members in the fashion of their coats and hats, and the manner of wearing their hair from the plainness of dress, which characterizes the great body of Methodist preachers.

Resolved 2nd. That we use every consistent measure to bring back the members of our church, to that simplicity and plainness of dress, which we believe to be consistent with the Gospel and our Discipline.

Resolved 3rd. That we inforce more thoroughly the rules of our Discipline, especially those that relate to class-meetings, Love feasts, the use of ardent spirits, and dress.

The above resolutions were adopted.⁵⁶

Lane also served on still another committee of three, which investigated the inroads of Free Masonry into the Methodist

itinerancy in the Genesee Conference, and which committee formed these resolutions:

Resolved, that this Conference consider it an impropriety for any of its members to attach themselves to, or attend the Masonic Lodge, inasmuch it is contrary to the Apostolic teaching, "to avoid every appearance of evil" and for as much as it grieves the feelings of a considerable number of our pious brethren.

Resolved, Secondly, that if any traveling preachers belonging to this Conference, shall hereafter attach himself to, or persist in attending the Lodges, he be delt with as in other cases of imprudent conduct.

Both resolutions adopted.⁵⁷

Lane's service on the latter committee subsequently caused him considerable discomfiture. In his home community of Wilkes-Barre, where he had been affiliated with the Masons, certain persons proceeded to "implicate and assail his character." On September 24, 1823, Lodge No. 61, F. and A. M. (Free and Accepted Masons), having been appraised of the resolutions made at the Genesee Conference of 1820, and ascribing their authorship to Lane, formulated some resolutions of their own, calling for an investigating committee.⁵⁸ The efforts of the committee resulted in a carefully framed letter from George Lane to the members of the Free Mason Lodge. His detailed reply to the charges leveled against him is a classic representation of his powers of diplomacy in ameliorating a tense situation between the Methodist clergy and the Masonic Society.⁵⁹

If the proceedings of the year 1820 were consequential in the life of George Lane, they were certainly no less momentous for Joseph Smith, residing at Manchester, Ontario County, New York. Joseph attested that early in the spring of 1820 he retired to a previously designed place of seclusion and knelt in prayer. His efforts culminated in a heavenly manifestation: "I saw a

pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun; which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other.) "This is my beloved Son, hear him."⁶⁰

Joseph asserted that his vision of the Father and the Son came from the motivation of an unusual excitement on the subject of religion, generated by various sects, and affecting "the whole district of country."⁶¹ The question necessarily arises, was Rev. George Lane among the religionists promoting the revivalist excitement in the area, and in particular, was he a personal instigator of Joseph's design to pray?

In the pursuit of his ministerial duties, Lane was in the geographical proximity of Joseph Smith on a number of occasions between the years 1819 and 1825. The nature and degree, or indeed the actuality, of their acquaintanceship during this interval poses a number of interesting possibilities.

For eight days, from July 1, 1819, to July 8, 1819, George Lane was in attendance at the annual Genesee Conference at Vienna (now Phelps), New York, some fifteen miles southeast of the Smith farm at Manchester.⁶² In July 1820, Lane would have had to pass through the greater Palmyra-Manchester vicinity on his way to Niagara, Upper Canada, to attend the conference held at Lundy's Lane, July 20 to July 26, 1820,⁶³ unless he went by an extremely circuitous route. Present records do not specify Lane's itinerary or exact route of travel to and from Niagara, but they do for Lane's friend, Rev. George Peck, who lived at Kingston, Pennsylvania, just across the Susquehanna River from Lane at Wilkes-Barre.

Reverend Lane's conference route took him north to Ithaca, then on to a camp meeting in the Holland Purchase, subsequently passing along the Ridge Road, and after two weeks he arrived at Lundy's Lane. His return journey was by way of the Ridge Road

to Rochester and then on to Auburn, New York.⁶⁴ A quick look at the map of New York State will show that Palmyra is almost on a direct line between Rochester and Auburn. If Lane followed a similar avenue, it would have brought him very close to the neighborhood of the Smith home. As with Reverend Peck, he may even have stopped at a camp meeting somewhere along the way. A preacher of his standing would always be a welcome guest.

CONFERENCE AGAIN IN PHELPS IN 1822

The Genesee Conference of 1822 was again held at Vienna (now Phelps), Ontario County, New York, from July 24 to August 2, 1822. Lane was present and was examined and passed. He was also called to serve on two committees: one concerned the examination of manuscripts for publication, and the other, the receipt of communications relative to the establishment of auxiliary societies.⁶⁵ For some ten days, Lane was once again within a few miles of Palmyra Township.

From July 1819 to July 1823, Lane served as supervising elder of the Susquehanna District. During the interval from July 1823 to July 1824, his appointment was the Wyoming circuit.⁶⁶ In July 1824 he was once more assigned as a presiding elder, this time, however, to the Ontario District. The Ontario District then comprised the circuits of Lyons, Ontario, Seneca, Crooked Lake, Canandaigua and Geneva, Canisteo and Bath, and Prattsburgh.⁶⁷ For an entire year, then, July 1824 to July 1825, Lane presided over the district within the confines of which the Smith family resided. On January 25, 1825, Lane addressed a glowing letter to the editors of the *Methodist Magazine* in which he outlined the unusual successes being enjoyed in the Ontario District. An entry of particular interest states:

December 11th and 12th our quarterly meeting for Ontario circuit was held in Ontario. It was attended with showers of blessings, and

we have reason to believe that much good was done. Here I found that the work which had for some time been going on in Palmyra, had broken out from the village like a mighty flame, and was spreading in every direction. When I left the place, December 22nd, there had, in the village and its vicinity, upward of one hundred and fifty joined the society, besides a number that had joined other churches, and many that had joined no church.⁶⁸

From the foregoing evidence, it is easy to see that Joseph Smith could have had contact with Lane at a number of points during this extended period. If such an acquaintance existed, when would it have been? Oliver Cowdery, in December 1834, undertook to enlighten the readers of the *Messenger and Advocate* on the circumstances shaping the earliest foundations of the Church. As he prepared to recount the events of Joseph's "15th year" (1820), he prefaced his remarks with this statement:

It is necessary to premise this account by relating the situation of the public mind relative to religion, at this time:

One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented man possessing a good share of literary endowments, and apparent humility. There was a great awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of religion, and much inquiry for the word of life. Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches.—Mr. Lane's manner of communication was peculiarly calculated to awaken the intellect of the hearer, and arouse the sinner to look about him for safety—much good instruction was always drawn from his discourses on the scriptures, and in common with others, our brother's mind became awakened.⁶⁹

Cowdery's account at this juncture is in harmony with Joseph Smith's account relative to the circumstances of 1820. However, in his next letter to the *Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, he retracts his initial statement and says, "You

REV. BENAJAH WILLIAMS

After this article was originally published in 1969, important evidence was discovered that identifies the route taken by Reverend Lane to Lundy's Lane, Upper Canada, in June 1820. Rev. Benajah Williams of Mendon, Monroe County, New York, assigned to the Bloomfield circuit, was also on his way to the Annual Genesee Conference in Upper Canada. According to his journals, while en route to General Conference, Williams attended a two-day camp meeting, Saturday, June 15, and Sunday, June 16, at Squire Baker's in Richmond, Ontario County, New York. There he "found Br. Lane a Presiding Elder from Susquehanna District with five more preachers" on the 15th. On June 16, Williams recorded in his journal, "Br. Lane exhorted and spoke on Gods method in bringing about Reffermation his word was with as from the authority of God." Richmond Township, Ontario County, is located fourteen miles west of Canandaigua, Ontario County. Richmond Center is situated approximately twenty-five miles straight-line distance to the southwest of the Joseph Smith Sr. log home in what was then Palmyra Township, Ontario (later Wayne) County, New York. Benajah Williams Journal, June 15–16, 1820, vol. 1, 1818–24. These important journal entries were brought to my attention in 1999 by the late Steven Sorenson, former director of the LDS Church Historical Department. They were then housed at the Ambrose Swasey Library, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, New York. The rarely used Williams journals were later withdrawn from their accession list and acquired by a document dealer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Larry C. Porter, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 30, 2009, Provo, UT)

will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr's age—that was an error in the type—it should have been in the 17th.—You will please remember this correction, as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823."⁷⁰

Cowdery thus circumvents the happenings of 1820 by omitting any entry relative to the First Vision. Instead, he suddenly moves ahead three years, identifies the religious fervor, and begins the account with the visit of the angel on the evening of

September 21, 1823. However, by including an account of the appearance of the Father and Son in his 1838 account and by identifying the time as “early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty,” Joseph Smith filled in the omissions in Cowdery’s letter and then continued to narrate the events of his life up until the time and events that Cowdery noted found their sequence.⁷¹

Years later, in 1883, William Smith, Joseph’s younger brother, gave his reminiscences of Lane on the scene: “In 1822 and 1823, the people in our neighborhood were very much stirred up with regard to religious matters by the preaching of a Mr. Lane, an Elder of the Methodist Church, and celebrated throughout the country as a ‘great revival preacher.’”⁷²

Again, in 1893, just prior to his death, William further identified Lane as one who was directly responsible for Joseph’s prayerful inquiry: “Rev. Mr. Lane of the Methodists preached a sermon on ‘What church shall I join?’ And the burden of his discourse was to ask God, using as a text, ‘If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally.’ And of course when Joseph went home and was looking over the text he was impressed to do just what the preacher had said, and going out in the woods with child like, simple trusting faith believing that God meant just what He said, kneeled down and prayed.”⁷³

What were the recollections of Joseph himself relative to an association with Lane? Nowhere in the Prophet’s personal writings does he appear to have mentioned George Lane by name.⁷⁴ He does speak of a certain Methodist minister who was active in the revival sequence, and in whom he confided the aspects of his vision, but he did not identify that man further.⁷⁵ Lucy Mack Smith, another principal in those eventful days, similarly makes no mention of him by name.⁷⁶ However, both Oliver Cowdery and Joseph’s younger brother William specifically name Lane as a key figure in awakening Joseph to the possibility of asking

God for wisdom. Oliver attributed his knowledge to Joseph, and William presumably spoke from the same source or from personal memory.⁷⁷

What of Rev. George Lane's own expressions relative to Joseph Smith or Mormonism? The writer has thus far been unable to find any account, public or private, which would indicate Lane's personal reactions either to the Prophet or to the Mormon sect. However, there were certain circumstances, outside of the Ontario scene, which may well have prompted Lane to make some comment on Mormonism. Irene, an older sister of Lane, lived among the Mormons and became a member of the Church near the end of her life. She married David Foote at Windsor, Broome County, New York, in 1791, and in the fall of 1798 they moved to Dryden, Cayuga (now Tompkins) County, New York. During the spring of 1830, David borrowed a copy of the Book of Mormon from a neighbor and after reading it testified that it was a true book. In November 1833, he journeyed to Genesee, Livingston County, New York, to investigate the new religion. While there, he was baptized by Elder John Murdock. As a result of his conversion, David's daughter Betsey, another daughter, and a son, Warren, linked their fortunes to the Mormon faith. Irene died at Montebello, Illinois, March 5, 1846, and was buried in the Nauvoo cemetery.⁷⁸

Rev. George Lane's wife, Sarah, in ill health, had not accompanied her husband to his 1824 appointment as presiding elder of the Ontario District but rather had remained in Wilkes-Barre. As Sarah's health continued to fail, Lane elected to "locate" in 1825. For nine years, 1825-34, he was engaged as a merchant in Berwick, Pennsylvania. "But these were not years of idleness; he had his regular appointments for twenty miles around Berwick, and many in that region will arise and call him blessed."⁷⁹

Sarah Harvey Lane died on October 11, 1832, in Kingston, Pennsylvania, while visiting at the home of the Pierce Butler

family.⁸⁰ Reverend Lane continued his mercantile business for a season, but again unable to stay away from the itinerant ministry, he sold his interest in the store and was admitted into the Oneida Conference in 1834 (the Oneida Conference had been formed in 1829 by a division of the old Genesee Conference). He was once more appointed as presiding elder of the Susquehanna District, making his residence at Wilkes-Barre in his house on the public square.⁸¹

The general conference of the Methodist Church elected George Lane assistant book agent in 1836. He removed to New York City and transferred his relations to the New York Conference. In September 1840, he became book agent. In all, he served the Methodist Book Concern for a total of sixteen years. During twelve of those years, he held the office of treasurer of the missionary society.⁸²

In New York, Lane met Miss Lydia Bunting. They were married January 24, 1837.⁸³ Two children were born to the couple, Sarah Georgiana and Lydia.⁸⁴ In 1852, Lane received a superannuated relation, and at the age of sixty-eight, Lane and his wife retired to Mount Holly, New Jersey. With Lane's health declining, it was thought best to return him to more familiar surroundings amidst family and friends in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Rev. George Lane died there on May 6, 1859, at age seventy-five, at the home of his son, Charles A. Lane.⁸⁵ He was buried beside his first wife, Sarah Harvey Lane, in the Hollenback cemetery at Wilkes-Barre.

In passing, he was memorialized by his lifelong friend, Rev. George Peck:

After a most intimate acquaintance with the Rev. George Lane, of more than forty years, observing him under a great variety of circumstances, and some of them exceedingly difficult and trying, we can say what we can say of only a few individuals, that we never saw in him anything to reprove, or anything which, all things considered,

deserves to be characterized as a fault. We love to contemplate the history, both the inward and the outward life, of this holy man and eminent servant of Jesus Christ. He has a high seat in heaven. He “turned many to righteousness,” and he “shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever.” He was in deed and in truth, our friend for many long years, and we loved him. May God give us more of his excellent spirit; and now that he has gone to heaven in a chariot of fire, may his mantle fall upon his sons in the Gospel.⁸⁶

Having examined in detail the life of the Christian gentleman, Rev. George Lane, the writer affirms the epitaph inscribed to the itinerants of the old Genesee Conference: “a ministry of good ‘Gifts,’ much ‘Grace,’ and marked ‘Usefulness.’”⁸⁷

NOTES

1. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1860, 40.
2. *The Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York), June 23, 1859, 1.
3. Oscar Jewell Harvey, *The Harvey Book* (Wilkes-Barre, PA: E.B. Yordy, 1899), 128.
4. James Hill Fitts, *Lane Genealogies* (Exeter, NH: Newsletter Press, 1897), 2:49.
5. George Peck, *Early Methodism Within the Bounds of the Old Genesee* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1860), 492.
6. Marjory B. Hinman and Bernard W. Osborne, comps., *The White Man Settles Old Onaquaga* (Onaquaga, NY: Old Onaquaga Historical Society, 1968), 15, 17.
7. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.
8. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 129.
9. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 447–49.
10. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 492.
11. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.

12. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 40.
 13. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.
 14. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.
 15. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 40.
 16. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.
 17. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 40.
 18. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.
 19. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 40.
 20. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 234–35.
 21. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 235–38.
 22. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 40.
 23. Stewart Pearce, *Annals of Luzerne County* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1860), 294.
 24. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 1:1, 5. This is a transcribed copy of the original journal, prepared at the instigation of the Wyoming Conference in 1860. It contains volumes 1 and 2 under a single cover. This transcript is in the Wyoming Seminary, Kingston, PA.
- To “locate” is to leave the itinerancy and to either become a local minister or assist in ministerial duties when requested.
25. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 40–41.
 26. *Stewards’ Book for Wioming Surket [sic]*, 1804–10. The original *Stewards’ Book* is at the Wyoming Seminary, Kingston, PA.
 27. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 166.
 28. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 132–34.
 29. F. C. Johnson, *The Historical Record* (Wilkes-Barre: Wilkes-Barre Record, 1888), 2:191.
 30. William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Methodist Pulpit* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1861), 811.
 31. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 134.
 32. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 129–30.
 33. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 130. See *Susquehanna Democrat* (Wilkes-Barre), October 21, 1814, for announcement of the opening of the new store in Wilkes-Barre.
 34. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 130.

35. Luke A. Sarsfield, letter to Larry C. Porter, October 22, 1968. Certain primary documents of the Wilkes-Barre Bridge Company are located in the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Wilkes-Barre, PA.

36. George Peck, *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1874), 97.

37. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 311–13.

38. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 313.

39. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 130.

40. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 77.

41. Abel Stevens, *The Centenary of American Methodism: A Sketch of Its History, Theology, Practical System, and Success* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1865), 112.

42. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1819, 50–52.

43. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), 12.

44. Stevens, *Centenary of American Methodism*, 111.

45. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1819, 51–52.

46. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 44.

47. Albert Clarke, *Methodist Episcopal Church, Lanesboro, Pennsylvania* (Lanesboro, PA: n.p., 1912), 11.

48. Peck, *Life and Times of Rev. George Peck*, 68.

49. George Peck, “Mormonism and the Mormons,” *Methodist Quarterly Review*, January 1843, 112.

50. Clarke, *Methodist Episcopal Church*, 9.

51. Clarke, *Methodist Episcopal Church*, 11–12.

52. Clarke, *Methodist Episcopal Church*, 12. See *Early Methodism*, 332–33.

53. Peck, *Life and Times of Rev. George Peck*, 108–9.

54. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 85, 92. Reference is to the annual examination of each itinerant to approve him for continued service.

55. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 85.

56. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 101–2.

57. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 90.

58. Oscar Jewell Harvey, *A History of Lodge No. 61, F. and A.M., Wilkesbarré, Pa.* (Wilkes-Barre: E. B. Yordy, 1897), 63.

59. George Lane to the members of the Free Mason Lodge in Wilkes-Barre, n.d. A copy of the original letter is located at the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Wilkes-Barre, PA. See also, *A History of Lodge No. 61 F. and A. M., Wilkesbarré, Pa.*, 63–65.

60. *Times and Seasons*, April 1, 1842, 748.

61. *Times and Seasons*, January 1, 1841, 5.

62. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 76–84.

63. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 85–104.

64. Peck, *Life and Times of Rev. George Peck*, 114–17.

65. *Journal of the Genesee Conference*, 1810–28, 119–40.

66. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1823, 50.

67. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1824, 52.

68. Rev. George Lane, “Revival of Religion on Ontario District,” *Methodist Magazine* 8 (1825): 160.

69. *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, December 1834, 42.

70. *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 78.

71. Joseph Smith, *Documentary History of the Church*, *Journal History of the Church* (MSS, in LDS Church Historian’s Office), Book A-1, 1–3 (hereafter cited as DHC). See also *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, 1902), 1:2–6.

72. William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, IA: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1883), 6.

73. *Deseret Evening News*, January 20, 1894, 11.

74. In retrospect, Joseph himself would have instructed Oliver in identifying Reverend Lane by name as the person through whom, “in common with others, our brother’s mind became awakened.” When Oliver first talks about giving the readers of the *Messenger and Advocate* “a full history of the rise of the church,” he declared: “That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our brother J. Smith Jr. has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected

with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative, well worth the examination and perusal of the Saints.” *Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834, 13. Oliver is obviously getting his description of Reverend Lane from the Prophet as given on page 11, herein.

75. Joseph Smith, *Journal History* (MS in LDS Historian’s Library), Book A-1, 3. See also DHC, 1:6.

76. Amidst the profusion of dates ascribed to Joseph’s vision, Lucy Mack Smith confirms Joseph’s dating of that experience as the spring of 1820. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and his Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 74, 76.

77. See Oliver Cowdery’s account in *Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834, 13, and December 1834, 42; William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, IA: Harold Steam Book, 1883), 6.

78. Warren Foote, “Autobiography of Warren Foote, 1817–1879,” an unpublished journal. The special circumstances of her baptism on February 28, 1846, are stated on page 86. For information of her husband and of her burial, see also Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:374–75.

79. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 41.

80. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 132.

81. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.

82. *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 1860, 41. See H. C. Jennings, *The Methodist Book Concern: A Romance of History* (New York: Cincinnati, 1924), 82–83, for additional information on Lane’s activity in the book concern.

83. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 132.

84. *Lane Genealogies*, 2:69.

85. Harvey, *Harvey Book*, 132.

86. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 23, 1859, 1.

87. F. W. Conable, *History of the Genesee Annual Conference* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1885), 21.