

LAURA SMITH HAVILAND

Our Wesleyan History



A WOMAN'S LIFE WORK

By Lee Haines

Historian of The Wesleyan Church

Laura Smith Haviland, a tiny frontier woman who made the ideals of nineteenth-century Wesleyan Methodists come to life, was born to Quaker parents in Canada on December 20, 1808. When she was seven, the family moved to New York.

What education Laura received came from her mother and a neighboring lady, but the little girl became an insatiable reader. One dark night her father found her absorbed in a book describing the horrors of the slave trade. He relieved her distress by telling her that it had been outlawed.

With some playmates, Laura visited Methodist prayer meetings. She hungered for a warm religious experience, but was forbidden by her quiet Quaker parents from attending any more such services.

When Laura was seventeen, she married Charles Haviland. Charles was a committed Friend and it seemed that Laura was forever barred from the spiritual experience for which she till longed. She prayed privately and made the best of her situation.

In 1826, Laura's parents moved to southeastern Michigan, near Adrian. Three

LAURA SMITH HAVILAND

Our Wesleyan History

years later, Charles and Laura followed with their two children. A log cabin 16 by 18 feet was built, and here Laura continued raising her family, giving birth to a total of eight children. Her devotion to human need quickly became apparent, as she became nurse to every ill neighbor.

Laura's life was soon changed in keeping with her childhood thoughts. In the early 1830's, she helped organize the first antislavery society in Michigan. Then she and Charles established the first station on the "Underground Railroad" in Michigan, helping escaped slaves slip through to Canada and freedom. While the Friends opposed slavery, they thought the abolition movement much too "exciting." As a result, Charles and Laura withdrew from the Friends. In 1841, they joined in the organization of Wolf Creek, the first Wesleyan Methodist church in Lenawee County. Laura was now free to fight slavery and enjoy the warm spiritual experience she had so long desired.

By the time Laura had four children old enough to learn, she became their school teacher and also took on the responsibility of instructing the orphans of the county. Her concern for the children of the area led to her establishment of Raisin Institute in 1836; she insisted that it be open to all regardless of race, sex, or creed – a radical move for that day. The school eventually became an orphanage supported by the State of Michigan and was moved to Coldwater.

In 1845, Laura faced the darkest period of her life. Within a six weeks' period, erysipelas took her husband, her mother, her sister, her father, and her baby. She herself almost died, and when she recovered she found herself a widow at the age of 36, with seven children to care for, and a debt of \$700 to cope with. With characteristic courage and trust in God, she persisted over the skepticism of businessmen about a woman's ability and took charge of her husband's business.

After Charles's death, Laura intensified her involvement in the Underground Railroad. In 1846-47 she cleverly foiled the efforts of men from the South to return a family of escaped slaves to bondage. In their rage, the men placed a price of \$3,000 on the head of the tiny woman, dead or alive. She defied the offer, making

LAURA SMITH HAVILAND

Our Wesleyan History

repeated trips to Cincinnati, Ohio, to help escaped slaves. She even slipped into Kentucky to assist them and to encourage an imprisoned abolitionist. She personally

Laura Smith Haviland lived like her Master, who came “not to be served, but to serve.” Whenever she saw human need, she hastened to meet that need. The neglected child, the Negro slave, the wounded soldier, the burdened sinner, the forgotten prisoner, that starving and naked refugee, the hapless victim of alcohol – all felt the loving touch of this quiet Quaker-Wesleyan.

escorted some escapees all the way to Canada, and spent considerable time near Windsor teaching freedmen. Shortly before the Civil War, she took a daring trip to Little Rock, Arkansas, attempting to bring out the wife of one slave who had already reached Michigan. There she lived in a slave-owner’s home, seeing the atrocities of slavery firsthand, and once stared down three bloodhounds which were trained to kill.

When the Civil War began, Laura secured recommendations from the governor and a congressman, and traveled down the Mississippi to minister to wounded soldiers and former slaves. She succeeded in having the head of one military hospital removed because of his cruelty and neglect, and successfully intervened in behalf of 3,000 Union soldiers imprisoned on an island in the Gulf of Mexico. Still later she went to Kansas to minister to the hordes of refugees there. Some of the white refugees did not care to work, and with these Laura had little patience. Following the War, she visited Washington, interceding with President Andrew Jackson for a convict, and carried on rescue work in Virginia.

Laura addressed the Wesleyan Methodist Michigan Annual Conference on her work at the 1865 session, and the 1867 session recognized her work among the freedmen as a conference appointment. Later she rejoined the Friends, but she always maintained close fellowship with the Wesleyans.

LAURA SMITH HAVILAND

Our Wesleyan History

By 1879, multitudes of Negroes were fleeing from the South, where the Klan was making life intolerable, and pouring into Kansas. Laura hastened there to serve again. She helped found an educational institution for refugees, and in 1883 went to Washington to win financial support from Congress. She returned to minister in a mission in Hell's Half Acre in Kansas City. Her labors led to the naming of Haviland, Kansas, in her honor.

In 1881, Laura wrote her autobiography in *A Woman's Life Work*. In it she summarizes her philosophy thus:

Is it not the duty of every Christian to bring his or her religion into every line of life work, and act as conscientiously in politics as in church work? Sanctified common sense is loudly called for on the highway of holiness. In whatever condition or station in life we find ourselves, are we not our brother's keeper in a more extensive view than we are prone to conceive?

Laura Smith Haviland lived a long and active life, dying in April 1898. Eleven years after her death, a life-sized statue (see drawing on page one) of this tiny woman was erected in front of the city hall at Adrian – one of the very few erected to commemorate the life of a woman. Above a drinking fountain at her feet are the appropriate words, "I was thirsty and ye gave me drink."