

## John Kobler: Circuit Riding Methodist Preacher

In 1798 the Methodist Episcopal bishop Francis Asbury (1745-1816) sent John Kobler, presiding Elder of the Kentucky district, across the Ohio River into the Northwest Territory “to form a new circuit and to plant the first principles of the Gospel” in the frontier region of the Little and Great Miami Rivers. Rev. Kobler preached the first sermon in Warren County at Deerfield on the morning of August 9, 1798 in the house of a self-proclaimed Baptist then traveled to Turtle Creek where he preached at the house of Ichabod Corwin on the same day. After going to and preaching at Dayton, he rode down the Great Miami River and preached on circa August 14<sup>th</sup> to six or eight families at Franklin in the log cabin of Captain Robert Ross. Although the Methodist Episcopal Society of Franklin wasn't formally organized until 1825 and the first church building was constructed in the village during 1834, the Franklin Methodist congregation began with this service led by Rev. Kobler in 1798. Franklin was a regular stopping place for the itinerant Methodist preachers until a pastor was assigned in 1853

John Kobler had been born on August 29, 1768 in Culpepper County Virginia and was raised in a highly devout family. He became a Methodist itinerant preacher at the age of twenty-one. He soon volunteered to travel to the western frontier of Kentucky where he was considered a dedicated and effective servant of God. Hence, Bishop Asbury appointed him to be the first Methodist missionary sent north into the wilderness of the Ohio Territory.

Rev. Kobler served throughout his newly established Miami Circuit that extended from the Ohio River to Dayton for about nine months. He found this region to be in its almost native, rude, and uncultivated condition with relatively few settlers scattered in isolated clearings and little communities. Small parties of “friendly” Indians encamped occasionally near the settlements of Warren County until the period around the War of 1812. In the spring, the Indians often camped for making sugar from the maple trees. While these savage parties were considered friendly, they sometimes stole horses from the settlers.

As reported in the Beers History of Warren County Ohio (published in 1882), Rev. Kobler gives the following account of a visit from a group of Indians while he was preaching at Franklin in March 1799: “In the time of the first prayer, a company of Indians, to the number of fifteen, came to the door. When we rose from prayer, the old chief fixed his eyes on me and pushed through the company to give me his hand. He was much strung out with jewels in his ears, nose and breast, and the round tire about his head was indeed like the moon. His men all behaved well.”

No portraits or images are known to exist for Rev. Kobler although the former Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court John McLean (1785-1861), who was raised in Clear Creek Township near Ridgeville, often heard John Kobler preach when he was a boy and wrote about him as follows: “I will never forget his appearance and manner. I was always much interested with his discourse, and especially with his prayers. He was tall and well proportioned; his hair was black, and he wore it long, extending over the cape of his coat. His dress was neat, with a straight-breasted coat, and in every respect as became a Methodist preacher of that day. He had a most impressive countenance.”

Rev. Kobler was assigned to another district in 1799 and would not return to the Miami Valley area for over forty years when he made a short visit to Cincinnati and to some of the locations where he had once preached. He had left the itinerant ministry in 1809 exhausted and ill after more than eighteen years of hard travel in the western frontier. He went back to Virginia and was involved in local churches near his original home. In 1836, the Baltimore annual conference made him a superannuated (i.e., pensioned) minister along with assigning him to a preaching appointment in Fredericksburg Virginia where he continued active preaching the Gospel as well as successfully leading efforts to replace their decaying church building.

Rev. John Kobler died 1843 in Fredericksburg at the age of 74. His final words were reportedly: “Come Lord Jesus; come in power, come quickly!”

*(One of a regular series of brief reports on the people and events associated with the history and ministry of the Franklin First United Method Church. Robert Bowman, Historian)*