

Dromgoole, Edward ^[1]

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by E. T. Malone, Jr., 1986

1751–[before May] 1835

Edward Dromgoole, pioneer [Methodist](#) ^[2] [circuit rider](#) ^[3], was born in Sligo, Ireland. After hearing the preaching of Methodist missionaries, he renounced Catholicism and was ostracized by his family. He came to America in 1770 and entered the Methodist ministry in Maryland in 1772, later becoming a merchant, preacher, and planter in Virginia. He continued preaching for over sixty years until his death.

Dromgoole began to travel what was called the Frederick circuit in Maryland in January 1774. Later that year he was appointed on trial by the Philadelphia Conference to ride the Baltimore circuit, which took in part of Pennsylvania as well as Maryland. In November 1774 he was moved to "the other side of the Chesapeake Bay" to ride in part of Maryland and Delaware, where he continued until the spring of 1775. At the Philadelphia Conference that year he was sent to preach in Virginia, which had "but one Circuit, which extended from Chesterfield County . . . to the north of Petersburg, to the south of Tar-River in North Carolina, including many counties, making several hundred miles to ride once around," as he described it in a letter. In February 1776 the large circuit was divided into three—Sussex and Brunswick in Virginia and Roanoke, lying in North Carolina. Dromgoole first went "to ride over Roan Oak" in May 1776. He was in the neighborhood of [Halifax](#) ^[4], N.C., when news of the [Declaration of Independence](#) ^[5] was received; at the request of "Wilie Jones, Esquire, and other distinguished patriots of the town," he read the manifesto to the congregation after finishing his sermon. It is not known whether this reading took place before the more celebrated reading of the declaration in Halifax by [Cornelius Harnett](#) ^[6] on 1 Aug. 1776.

On 7 Mar. 1777 Dromgoole married Rebecca Walton, daughter of John Walton, "a respected citizen and man of much substance," of Brunswick County, Va. The Reverend Mr. Dromgoole established a plantation, Sligo (later known as Canaan), near Gholsonville in [Brunswick County](#) ^[7].

In the spring of 1778 Dromgoole attended, in Leesburg, Va., a conference at which ordination was discussed. Speaking of the North Carolina ministers there, he said, "The Circuit to the south was supplied with preachers," but he thought the absence of an older preacher to guide the young ones was felt. These young Carolina ministers were again present at the spring 1779 conference at Broken Back Church in Virginia. This time the subject of ordination split the group; Dromgoole, who opposed the laying on of hands, left the conference. He continued to preach and attempted to act as a peacemaker between the followers of old Methodism and the "newside." After he wrote to Bishop [Francis Asbury](#) ^[8] in spring 1780, Asbury came to a newside-called conference and proposed a reunion of the factions. The bishop asked the newside to suspend ordinations for one year on the condition that he write to John Wesley to let him know "the situation of the Societies in America." They agreed and a foundation for reconciliation was laid. In the latter part of 1782, Dromgoole went to several counties "low down in North Carolina, and preached at [Edenton](#) ^[9], Hartford, Nixonton, Pasquetank, Camden and Currytuck and went round the great desert" (Dismal Swamp) back to Virginia. During the winter and the following spring he continued to visit small communities in North Carolina. Writing to Asbury, he said: "the last time I went round I preached twice on Roan Oak Island, to this place I went about 22 miles by water." The Baltimore Conference of May 1784 assigned Dromgoole to [Bertie County](#) ^[10] for that year, but in late summer tragedy struck his family. Two of his children died, and his wife and another child became seriously ill. At this point, despite a great love for what he termed "the travelling plan," he decided to give up circuit riding to remain with his family and become a local preacher in Brunswick County, Va.

Dromgoole's connection with North Carolina continued, however. According to tradition, he was one of the twenty-two ministers who attended the 1785 conference at the home of the Reverend Green Hill in Louisburg. It was at this gathering, the first held in North Carolina, that Jesse Lee, a powerful preacher and early historian of the church, was received into the ministry. Built near Dromgoole's plantation in Brunswick County was the Olive Branch Meetinghouse, also called Branch Chapel or Dromgoole's Chapel, where he preached and where the Virginia Conference of 1803 was held.

Dromgoole was opposed to slavery. For a number of years he corresponded with former residents of his neighborhood who had moved to the new state of Ohio. He told Asbury in 1805, "a state where none of the human race are in captivity, would afford my mind more rest." Yet he never was able to break away from his possessions in Virginia. He and his wife had ten children, four of whom died young. One of his sons, Edward II (1788–1840), was a Methodist minister, physician, and planter in Brunswick County, Va. Another son, George Coke (1797–1847), was a planter, lawyer, Virginia legislator, militia general, and Democratic congressman. George attended [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[11] during 1813–14, but, according to an account in the Richmond, Va., *Dispatch* at the time of his death, "was expelled on account of a Democratic speech delivered at the college against the orders of the faculty," which the story said was [Federalist](#) ^[12] in sympathy. While at the university he was a member of the [Philanthropic Society](#) ^[13]. He later attended the [College of](#)

William and Mary^[14] and then studied law. He served three terms in Congress during 1835–37 and 1843–47 and was a participant in the famous Dugger-Dromgoole duel in 1837. A third son, Thomas, was sent to Cokesbury College in Harford County, Md.; however, he was "of an ungovernable and wicked turn, so that he could be kept there no longer."

As a young man, Dromgoole had learned the trade of weaving in Ireland and worked as a tailor's assistant in Maryland when he first came to America. The thimble that he used before the American Revolution^[15] was carefully preserved by his family. In his will, dated 2 Nov. 1833 and probated in May 1835, it is stated that he and his son Edward were partners in a mercantile business. The elder Dromgoole bequeathed several thousand dollars for the education of children in his neighborhood.

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Edward Dromgoole Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).^[17]

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William W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Methodists*, vol. 4 (1946). Apart from its holdings of Edward Dromgoole papers, the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, possesses a portion of the circuit rider's library.

Additional Resources:

Inventory of the Dromgoole Family Papers 1821-1896, 1850-1890. The College of William and Mary: <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=wm/viw00030.xml>^[18]

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