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## John H. Vincent: The Other Co-founder of Chautauqua

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## **“John H. Vincent: the Other Co-founder of Chautauqua”**

An address presented at the Chautauqua Institution Hall of Philosophy

by Timothy S. G. Binkley

July 20, 2018

Good afternoon, Chautauqua community! The title of my address, “John H. Vincent: The Other Co-founder of Chautauqua,” was inspired by conversations with Institution archivist and historian John Schmitz. Those conversations have left me with the impression that the life and work of Lewis Miller have been emphasized in recent years while the story of John Vincent has been somewhat neglected. As the archivist who manages the Vincent papers at Southern Methodist University, I have enjoyed studying this fascinating figure in American cultural history<sup>1</sup>. It is a great honor to be asked to share Bishop Vincent’s story with you. In the narrative of his life, I hope you will find many glimpses of the founding ethos and continuing character of Chautauqua.

The Chautauqua region has been a favorite vacation destination for generations of Americans. The area’s natural beauty is quite remarkable. The religious significance of this area is also remarkable. In the early 1800s, Chautauqua was part of the famous “burned-over-district” where spiritual revival spread uncontrollably like wild fire. The embers of revival continued to burn at the Chautauqua Lake Camp Meeting. Then, beginning in 1874, the Methodist camp meeting grounds on Chautauqua Lake became the site of an educational event... that became a cultural institution... that became a nation-wide and world-wide movement. The Chautauqua movement brought faith and science, music and literature, history and innovation, art and

wholesome recreation to the masses. The Institution became so popular that, in 1905, Theodore Roosevelt declared: **“Chautauqua is the most American thing in America.”**<sup>2</sup>

History demonstrates that when the times are right and the right people get together, amazing things happen. So it was with the Chautauqua Institution, which was established by two forward-thinking Methodists: Rev. John H. Vincent (1832-1920) and businessman Lewis Miller (1829-1899).

The younger of the two, John H. Vincent, was a celebrated minister, author, educator, orator, and Methodist bishop. He was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on February 23, 1832, the fourth child of John Himrod Vincent and Mary Raser Vincent. Rev. Vincent’s father was at different times a farmer, miller, postmaster, and store owner who moved from Pennsylvania to Alabama around 1820 hoping to prosper there. His prosperity was more personal than financial. For in Alabama, John Himrod Vincent met and married Mary Raser, another Pennsylvanian. They moved their family back to the Keystone State in 1837. Although young John Vincent was only five years old at the time of the move, he always cherished his memories of early childhood in the south. Those recollections included a favorite game: rounding up his friends and playing preacher.

The Vincents were Methodists, and religion was an important part of their family life. In his papers, John Vincent credited the development of his faith to three things: the nurture of the church, the example of his mother’s spiritual fervor, and the experience of family devotions at home, which included Sunday afternoon family hymn sings. It is also worth noting that Vincent’s father was a well-respected Sunday School superintendent. The Vincent home was a place of warm hospitality for a wide variety of ministers and other educated people. In 1888 author Sarah K. Bolton stated: “Here no denomination was unwelcome, and young John Vincent,

though a Methodist in belief, grew to manhood with a Christian love broader than any sect and wider than any section.”<sup>3</sup>

John Vincent’s first career was as a school teacher. He was just fifteen at the time. Though he showed natural talent as a teacher, Vincent began to sense that his calling in life was to serve in the ministry. In 1850, at the age of 18, he was licensed to preach and began serving a Methodist circuit in Pennsylvania. Two years later, in 1852, Vincent’s mother died. Shortly afterwards he moved to New Jersey in order to study at the Newark Wesleyan Institute.

From early on in his ministry, Vincent was known for his deep interest in Christian Education. He expressed that passion in two ways: theoretically, by calling for the training of Sunday School teachers, and practically, by developing what he called “The Palestine Class.” The Palestine Class was a novel approach to teaching the faith by immersing participants in cultural history and geography, utilizing the best current scholarship from the sciences and humanities. This seed of the Chautauqua movement was sown in 1855.

After completing his ministerial studies in 1857, Vincent was ordained an Elder in the New Jersey Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In a rather unorthodox move, his first action as an Elder in the New Jersey Conference was to request a transfer to the Rock River Conference in Illinois. The explanation for this request comes not from the realms of church history, but from the realms of family history. John Vincent wanted to move west to be close to his widower father.

More family history was soon in the works! On November 10, 1858, John Vincent married Sarah Elizabeth Dusenbury. Known as “Lib” and “Libbie,” Mrs. Vincent shared her husband’s Methodist faith, love of books, and vision for the promotion of education. Her support

as confidant and advisor enabled John Vincent to succeed in the ministry and as a public celebrity. Their only child, George Edgar Vincent, was born in 1864.

Rev. Vincent served Methodist charges in Joliet, Mt. Morris, Galena, Rockford, and Chicago, Illinois from 1857 to 1866. Of special note, in 1860, shortly after being appointed pastor of the Bench Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Galena, John Vincent met Captain Ulysses S. Grant. The two respected each other and became lifelong friends. When Captain Grant's volunteer company departed Galena on April 25, 1861, Rev. Vincent offered a patriotic farewell address to the troops while perched atop a railroad car.<sup>4</sup> After the war concluded, Vincent had the privilege of accompanying Grant on his return to Galena. There he expressed the general's greetings to the gathered crowd.<sup>5</sup>

A well-published anecdote about Vincent and Grant states that,

One moonlight evening in Washington, as Grant and his former pastor were strolling around the town, the latter "remarked on a peculiarity of the dispatches which the General had sent from the field: 'It has been noticed that you never speak of God or invoke divine aid, and uncharitable critics have commented unfavorably on the fact.'" "That's true," replied Grant in his quiet way. "The other side were always calling on God, but I thought it better to trust more and say less."<sup>6</sup>

I cannot verify that the story is true, but it seems true to their characters and their relationship.

In his autobiography, John Vincent confides that he began to dream of world travel at an early age. His first opportunity to travel abroad came in the form of an educational tour of Europe, Egypt, and Palestine in 1862. Before committing to the trip, Vincent wrote to Grant, who replied on May 25, 1862: "If you should make your expected trip to Palestine it would afford me the greatest pleasure to hear from you from that far off land and to reply punctually to all your letters."<sup>7</sup> If Vincent were seeking permission to leave the United States during wartime, the general seems to have had no qualms in granting it. Upon his return from overseas, Vincent

joined the U. S. Christian Commission, a civilian organization founded by the YMCA to furnish supplies, medical services, pastoral care, and religious literature to Union troops. One of Vincent's final acts of ministry on the Commission was to preach to Confederate prisoners of war at Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>8</sup>

While John Vincent was successful as a preacher and a chaplain, his favorite cause continued to be Christian Education. In 1855 he had started "The Palestine Class," mentioned earlier. Two years later he established a training class for Sunday School teachers in his church. Within four years that program had outgrown Vincent's church, and he convened the first Sunday School Teacher's Institute in the United States.

During the mid-1860s, Vincent founded two successful religious periodicals: *Northwestern Sunday School Quarterly* (1865) and *Sunday School Teacher* (1866). At the same time, Vincent developed a Sunday School "Uniform Lesson Plan" that was later adopted inter-denominationally. The International Uniform Sunday School Lessons are still in publication today. Not all of Vincent's writings were serious. For instance, in an 1866 volume titled *Our Sunday School Scrap Book*, co-compilers John Vincent and Daniel Wise offered this advice on how to have a small class: "Be tedious. Bore your class with long talks until the bell rings, and they will cease to bore you with their presence."<sup>9</sup>

Denominational leaders took note of Vincent's religious education work. In 1866, they named him General Agent for the Methodist Episcopal Sunday School Union. Two years later, the General Conference of 1868 appointed him Corresponding Secretary of the Tract Society, Superintendent of the Department of Sunday-School Instruction, and Editor of the *Sunday-School Journal*. Under his management, the circulation of the *Sunday-School Journal* increased ten-fold.

When the Sunday-School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church met in October 1873, they discussed a special request from the Chautauqua Lake Camp-ground Association, then passed the following resolution: “*Resolved*, That we approve the project of a Sunday-school teachers’ assembly in August 1874, on the Chautauqua Lake campground, and that we refer the whole matter, with full power to order and arrange, to the committee of this board in charge of the normal department.”<sup>10</sup> Rev. Vincent was the chair of the normal department, so this matter landed on his desk. When the project committee met, they clarified the goals of creating an inter-denominational, multi-day training event for Sunday School teachers and other church leaders, led by the best talent in the country, and intentionally combining daily study with healthful recreation. The committee elected Lewis Miller president and John Vincent superintendent of instruction.

The two leading players were now in place. Months of preparation followed, and in August 1874 the time was right for the birth of Sunday School Teachers’ Assembly at Chautauqua Lake. Bishop Vincent later reminisced about the opening night with these words:

The first Assembly – that of 1874 – opened on Tuesday evening, August 4, with the ringing of a great bell, sent to us from the Meneeleys of Troy. How with its brave tongue it sang a telling solo that first evening! And although it pronounced no articulate summons, there was in its roll and swing and echoes a call to a new and blessed service to which more than a thousand hearts made reverent response amidst the gathering shadows of that first Assembly evening on the shores of Lake Chautauqua.<sup>11</sup>

The 1874 Sunday School Teachers’ Assembly was so popular that it became an annual event. As the assembly grew in popularity, it also grew in length from two to nine weeks, becoming a full summer school with classes, lectures by notable speakers, concerts, and

wholesome entertainment. The off-season kept Vincent busy with writing and publishing, speaking tours, and international travel while Miller worked on fundraising and administration.

A significant expansion came in 1878 when John Vincent founded the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle “for the promotion of reading-habits among all classes of people at their homes during the entire year.”<sup>12</sup> Vincent anticipated around ten students the first year. More than 8,400 enrolled. Vincent’s biographer, his nephew Leon H. Vincent, noted that, “John Vincent believed that Chautauqua, through the C. L. S. C., if no substitute for the college, at all events did an effective work in building up the college and the university; it educated the parents.”<sup>13</sup>

Under the leadership of Chancellor Vincent and President Miller, the Chautauqua Assembly became the Chautauqua Institution. By 1885 the Chautauqua idea had grown beyond the limits of Western New York and was becoming “one of the most extensive movements for popular education in the United States.”<sup>14</sup>

Bishop Vincent summarized the basic principles of Chautauqua in his book, *The Chautauqua Movement*, as follows:

- The whole of life is a school, with educating agencies and influences all the while at work, from the earliest moment to the day of death.
- The true basis of education is religious. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, - the recognition of the Divine existence, and of his claims upon us as moral beings....
- All knowledge, religious or secular, is sacred to [those who surrender themselves] to God.<sup>15</sup>

After helping to found, promote, and run the Chautauqua Institution, Rev. Vincent’s next step in life was not an unexpected one. In 1888 the Methodist Episcopal Church elected him to the office of Bishop. First he was stationed in Buffalo, New York, then in Topeka, Kansas. In 1900, he was named Resident Bishop Abroad and charged with overseeing the nine Methodist



Episcopal conferences in Europe. This was an entirely new post. As an internationally-known figure, and a man who loved to travel, Vincent was the logical choice. He and Elizabeth moved to Zurich.

In the Methodist Episcopal Church, bishops served for life or until they were deemed unable to work, at which point their names were placed on the retired list. In 1904, just four years after being named Resident Bishop Abroad, the General Conference placed John Vincent's name on that list. Bishop Vincent was only seventy-two at the time, and he was eager to continue his episcopal duties. However, the General Conference of 1904 was in a mood to elect younger men to positions of leadership. Vincent and several other senior church officials were retired.

Reluctantly, Bishop Vincent accepted the church's decision. He and Elizabeth moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, where she died on March 30, 1909 after an extended illness. When not on the road speaking at universities, Chautauquas, Sunday School conventions, ministerial conferences, and other public celebrations, John Vincent spent the remaining years of his life in Hyde Park, Illinois, where his son was serving as Dean of the University of Chicago. An example of Vincent's continuing active service to the church during retirement was noted in the *Christian Advocate* of March 2, 1905:

After twenty-one sessions, the "Seven Days' Study in Church Life," conducted by Bishop Vincent at Park Place Strawbridge Church, [Baltimore], ended Monday night. They were studies helpful and wholesome and beneficial to many. A glorious optimism marked the whole work of the conductor, and brought sometimes a clash of opinions among the ministers who deal with problems in the great rough world which demand answer. The "Conversations," of an hour and a half each, were full of points and suggestions, and conductor and audience were alert and ready.<sup>16</sup>

After Baltimore, Vincent led the church life study program in Toronto and in numerous cities in Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.<sup>17</sup>

In April 1911 Vincent returned to Galena, Illinois. There he delivered a stirring address on the anniversary of U. S. Grant's birth.<sup>18</sup>

In 1912, at his eightieth birthday, Bishop Vincent was hailed "The John Wesley of American Methodism" by the *Epworth Herald*. For that special occasion, famed Chicago social reformer Jane Addams sent these personal greetings: "My Dear Bishop Vincent, May I congratulate you not only upon the founding of Chautauqua but also upon the very substantial contribution you have made toward educational methods adapted to working people."<sup>19</sup>

In his final years, Bishop Vincent showed signs of cognitive failure. Behind the footlights, he could still recite his famous orations, but offstage Vincent became reclusive and fearful, sometimes not recognizing long-term friends and associates. He died at home on May 9, 1920. His body was buried in Portville, New York, beside that of his beloved wife. At Chautauqua and throughout the country, Vincent was memorialized as an influential churchman and educator. Tributes in the press included these words: "The death of Bishop Vincent removes a man who probably did more for the promotion of education in America than any other man that the country has known." – *The Public Ledger*. "Bishop Vincent helped America. He believed in God and in man, and was the friend of both." – *The Chicago Evening Post*. "John H. Vincent made the name of Chautauqua immortal, and he made thousands of men and women happy by showing them that education should not end with youth, and that vacations need not imply vacuity of mind. He was a strong man, an impressive figure of a purposeful age." – *The New York Sun*.<sup>20</sup>

That "purposeful age" is now called the Progressive Era. And one of the positive forces of that progressive era was an idealistic Methodist clergyman who loved to travel and wanted to minister to the minds and souls of the masses. He did that in person, in print, and through an

event... that became an institution... that became a movement... that has blessed millions of lives in this country and around the world.

In closing, I leave you with John Vincent's personal statement of life principles called "My Resolve." I hope that you will take these thoughts and attitudes to heart and that you will consider adopting Bishop Vincent's resolves as your own.

**My Resolve**  
By Bishop Vincent

**I** will this day try to live a simple, sincere, and serene life; repelling promptly every thought of discontent, anxiety, discouragement, impurity and self-seeking; cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity and the habit of holy silence; exercising economy in expenditure, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every duty, and a childlike trust in God.

And as I cannot in my own strength attain this measure of wisdom and power, I make humble and firm resolve to seek all these things from my Heavenly Father in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and through the mystic and mighty energy of His Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> A finding aid to the John Heyl Vincent papers may be accessed online at <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/smu/00143/smu-00143.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of Chautauqua* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), x.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah K. Bolton, *Little Biographies; or, How Success Is Won* (Boston: Adams, Putnam and Co., 1888), 508.

<sup>4</sup> Transcription of the Farewell Address to the Jo Daviess Guard on April 25, 1861. John Heyl Vincent papers, Box 287B, Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>5</sup> Leon H. Vincent, *John H. Vincent, A Biographical Sketch* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1925), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Leon H. Vincent, *John H. Vincent*, 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> Transcript of a Ulysses Grant letter to John H. Vincent, May 25, 1862. John Heyl Vincent papers, Bridwell Library Special Collections, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>8</sup> 1865 letter from John H. Vincent to Elizabeth Vincent. John Heyl Vincent papers, Bridwell Library Special Collections, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>9</sup> Leon H. Vincent, *John H. Vincent*, 186.

<sup>10</sup> John Heyl Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement... With an Introduction by Lewis Miller* (Boston: Chautauqua Press, 1885), 22.

<sup>11</sup> John Heyl Vincent, *Chautauqua Hymnal and Liturgy* (New York: Novello, Ewer, 1903).

<sup>12</sup> John Heyl Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement*, 38.

<sup>13</sup> John Heyl Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement*, 138.

<sup>14</sup> William M. Twiddy, "Vincent, John Heyl" in *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, Vol. 2, ed. Nolan B. Harmon (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House), 2430.

<sup>15</sup> John Heyl Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement*, 185.

<sup>16</sup> "The Seven Days' Study," *The Christian Advocate* 80, no. 9 (March 2, 1905): 26.

<sup>17</sup> Leon H. Vincent, *John H. Vincent*, 304.

<sup>18</sup> Leon H. Vincent, *John H. Vincent*, 306.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Addams letter to John H. Vincent, February 23, 1902, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, John Heyl Vincent papers, Box 288, Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, <http://digitalcollections.smu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/jhv/id/213>.

<sup>20</sup> Leon H. Vincent, *John H. Vincent*, 313-314.

<sup>21</sup> John Heyl Vincent, "My Resolve," *The Epworth Herald* 23, no. 7 (February 17, 1912): 3.