

An old drawing thus pictures Joshua Thomas preaching at a Deals Island camp meeting. Thomas established Methodism as the bay islands' faith.



Thomas made his visits to the Chesapeake settlements during the first half of the last century in this log canoe. He named it "Methodist."

## The 'Parson Of The Islands'

*Joshua Thomas's Influence on the Bay People Has Lasted 100 Years*

ASK any native of the islands in Maryland's lower part of the Chesapeake, or of the adjacent Eastern Shore mainland, who was the "Parson of the Islands." There is little doubt but that he will give the answer without hesitancy.

And that would be—Joshua Thomas, who focused his religious endeavors on the inhabitants of Holland, Deals, Smith and Tangier islands.

Joshua Thomas is said to have been responsible for establishing Methodism as the deep-rooted faith of the Chesapeake islanders. And, although he has been dead for more than a century, his impact upon the people is evident today.

Thomas had an humble beginning, but in many quarters his name ranks with those of more illustrious origin. During World War II, when America was in the midst of a huge shipbuilding program, many vessels were given the names of prominent educators, statesmen and other dignitaries. In 1943 a Liberty ship was given his name.

THOMAS was born in a section known as Potato Neck, Somerset county, Md., on August 30, 1776. His father died when Joshua was but a baby and several years later his mother remarried.

The second union was not too successful and young Joshua and his brother, having become expert fishermen, helped maintain their home, which was then on Tangier Island. Such responsibilities probably molded his character.

Joshua's mother shared her Christian learning with her children and this had a dynamic effect upon the boy. It is said that he never went fishing without bringing back a good catch;

he said his secret was in praying to be directed where fish might be found.

As he grew older, religion took a greater hold on him. When he was 23 he married, establishing a home on Tangier Island and fishing and hunting for a livelihood.

At that time Tangier islanders were attached to the Episcopal Church; they attended services on the mainland at Annessex and Pungoteague, Va. Methodism began to arouse the people

By Robert H. Burgess

in various neighborhoods and preachers penetrated the Eastern Shore. Revivals were held, prayer meetings started and societies formed. The islanders, however, held aloof at first.

VISITING ministers would preach on the islands and on one occasion Joshua Thomas was selected to bring one over from the mainland. From then on,

Thomas gradually became attached to the Methodist Church. He sent to Baltimore for a Bible, and after learning to read passages from it he became more active in the field.

In 1807 he attended a camp-meeting near Pungoteague, and shortly thereafter he was converted. Later he inaugurated prayer meetings among neighbors on Tangier and Smith islands who had now accepted Methodism.

During the War of 1812 the

British made Tangier a center of operations while the Chesapeake was being ravaged. When they first landed on the island they were arrogant and possessive. Thomas became his people's spokesman and after a talk with the commanding officer persuaded him not to let his men molest the islanders or their property.

He even held a religious meeting in the wardroom of one of the British ships, and visited the fleet often while it was moored off Tangier.

A BIOGRAPHY, "Parson of the Islands," quotes Thomas's description of his famous speech to the British Army before its departure to attack Baltimore:

"Towards the close of summer, in the year 1814, we were made aware of some important movement among the forces encamped on the island. Preparations began both on shore and through the fleet in the harbor.

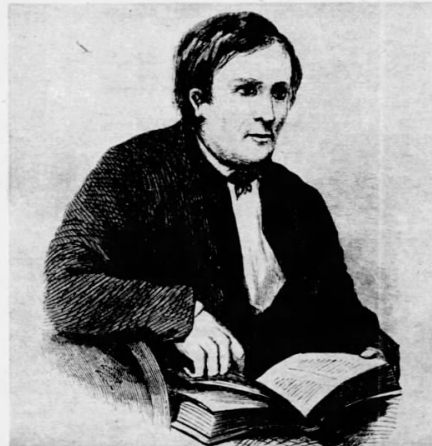
Some of the officers told me the cause of all this—they were going to take Baltimore.

"I told them they had better let it alone; they might be mistaken in their calculations, for the Baltimoreans would resist them and fight hard for their city and their homes.

"Before they left Tangier they sent me word to be ready to hold a public meeting and exhort the soldiers on the camp ground. I did not like to refuse, and yet I was very unwilling to perform this duty.

"It was arranged to be on the last Sunday they were in camp. Early that morning the flags were hoisted, the drums beat, and every preparation was made for a full turnout. At the

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The "Parson of the Islands" as he was depicted in a biography, now rare, that was published in 1861.



This is said to be the only photo ever taken of Thomas.