

## “Tales of Lorenzo Dow”

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Shortly after the Historical Society of Carroll County was founded in 1939, the organization co-sponsored a play entitled “Tales of Lorenzo Dow” written by Dorothy Elderdice and Charles Sellers. The play was performed by the Westminster Players and was centered around an enigmatic evangelist named Lorenzo Dow (1777-1834). Dow traveled extensively and preached in the old Union Meeting House that once stood in the Westminster Cemetery. A souvenir play booklet provided the following excerpt from a short history of the church and Dow’s sermon:

“The Old Union Meeting House was built in 1760 [c. 1810] by a corporation called the Trustees of the Westminster General Meeting House. The funds were obtained by lottery. The building of this church was a community affair and the various denominations of Westminster at that time held their services in the building.

The building was a two story brick building with galleries on three sides and a high wine glass pulpit with a stairway leading to it. The belfry of the church was a unique affair. In this belfry hung a large steel triangle that took the place of a bell, and in calling the congregation to the services, the sexton would climb into the belfry and strike the triangle with a huge hammer. This sound could be heard as far as that of the largest church bell.

The Union Meeting House was located on the knoll in the Westminster Cemetery, where the urn now stands, in a plot of ground containing one and one-half acres and used as a burying ground. Here many of the pioneer residents of Westminster are buried. William Winchester, the founder of Westminster, and his family are buried quite close to the site of the Old Union Meeting House.

For more than half a century this was the only Protestant Church in Westminster and during that time many of the ablest clergymen preached from its pulpit. The noted evangelist, Lorenzo Dow, preached in this church in 1801. He used a large tin horn to call his congregation to service which commenced at 5 o’clock in the morning. The following amusing story is told in connection with Lorenzo Dow’s revival at the Old Union Meeting House:

‘Lorenzo Dow preached a powerful sermon on the Judgment Day asking the question, ‘If Gabriel were to blow his trumpet announcing the day of Judgment is at hand, would you be ready?’ and in reply came the blast of a trumpet seemingly from the air. Again he asked the question, ‘Would you be ready?’ and again the trumpet blast a little nearer. The third time the question was asked, and again the sound of the trumpet. The altar rail was filled with people pleading for mercy and the revival was crowned with success.’

It was afterward learned the sound of the trumpet came from a trumpeter stationed in one of the tall trees which once stood on either side of the street.

The Old Union Meeting House is the setting for the play entitled, ‘Tales of Lorenzo Dow,’ written by Dorothy Elderdice and Charles Coleman Sellers and produced by the Westminster Players on February 14, 15, 19, 1940. The trumpet scene will be enacted.”

The booklet also provided some historical information about Dow beginning with a local newspaper article published at the time of his death in 1834:

“Here are excerpts from The Carrolltonian of Westminster, ‘[The] eccentric and far-famed preacher is no more. A native of Coventry, Connecticut, he traveled to various parts of the world for 30 years. It is probable that more persons have heard the gospel from him than from any other of his own singular life. He was an oddity of the oddest kind. His sayings have filled the newspapers from Maine to Louisiana. In Ireland he was attended by such crowds that a door-keeper was required at the edifices to demand entrance fees. Lorenzo and his wife Peggy slept at night by the wayside and forests a la bell etoile. Few who have seen him will forget his orangutan features, his outlandish clothes, and the beard that swept his aged breast, or the piping treble in which he was wont to preach what he called the Gospel of the Kingdom. Requiescat in pace.’

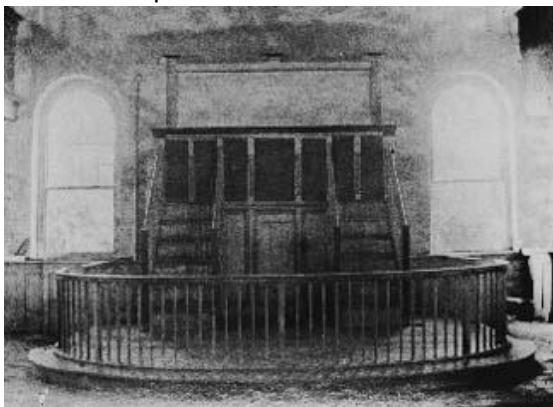
In Scharf’s History of Western Maryland it is stated that Lorenzo Dow preached eleven times in the old Union Meeting House, Westminster, once beginning his services at four o’clock in the morning.

The late Dr. Joshua Hering in his memoirs tells us that he knew a man who had attended these services and who recalled a text addressed especially to young men: ‘Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth.’ Just before the Union Meeting House was torn down Dr. Hering noted an inscription on the walls reading: ‘October 21, 1831, Dow preached to the Boys.’ The inference is that the above-mentioned text was used. Since the substance of a sermon on that text has been given to us by Lorenzo in his Journal, it is being reproduced in the play, ‘Tales of Lorenzo Dow.’

The series of episodes dramatized in this play depend for their source on the above-mentioned Journal and on the book by Charles Coleman Sellers entitled LORENZO DOW, BEARER OF THE WORD. Since it is difficult to tell just where legend dies and history begins, the two have freely mingled in folk tale narrative. While the story of the Gabriel Trumpet episode is related on the authority of the late Miss Mary Shellman to have occurred in Westminster, we find evidence of it in other places. Perhaps Lorenzo tried the device a number of times.

A respectable Methodist elder, calling attention to the fact that Lorenzo was buried by the Odd Fellows, commented, ‘A name which suits him admirably from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, including his long beard. Peace to his dust and may we never see his like again.’”

Unlike the unnamed Methodist minister mentioned above, many Americans apparently had great admiration for Dow. Beginning in early Nineteenth Century, thousands of children were named after him and the practice continued until the turn of the Twentieth Century.



*The altar rail of the Union Meeting House, that once stood in the Westminster Cemetery, was the scene of a revival led by evangelist Lorenzo Dow in the early Nineteenth Century. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Wesley C. Brooks.*