John Heyl Vincent Biography

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Biography

John Heyl Vincent (1832-1920) was an American educator and religious leader. He was instrumental in establishing the Chautauqua lectures, an important means of adult education in 19th-century America.

John Heyl Vincent was born on Feb. 23, 1832, in Tuscaloosa, Ala., moved with his family to Pennsylvania in 1837, and was educated at home and in various academies in the Lewisburg area. After sundry work experiences, Vincent was licensed to preach in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1849, and in 1851 he became a circuit rider in New Jersey, Ohio, and Illinois.

Vincent studied at a Methodist seminary and became minister of the important Trinity Church in Chicago in 1865. There he established and edited journals aimed at improving the educational arm of the church. He was reassigned to New York as general agent of the Methodist Sunday School Union in 1866. For the next 20 years he was a leader of the American Sunday School movement.

Vincent created the Sunday School Assembly at a campsite on Lake Chautauqua, N.Y., a summer experience for church instructors, in 1874. With Vincent as superintendent, the venture was enormously successful and soon abandoned denominational concerns in favor of general cultural studies with strong infusions of morality and inspiration. The festive, family-vacation atmosphere attracted thousands of visitors from all parts of the nation. Those unable to make the pilgrimage to New York were served, after 1878, by the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles, a home reading and correspondence course that followed a 4-year curriculum designed by Vincent. The circles, instantly popular, filled a need not met by the classically oriented colleges.

In 1881 the Chautauqua School of Theology was chartered, and in 1883 the Chautauqua University, with Vincent as chancellor, was created. But the public appetite for culture was insatiable. Another camp was started in Ohio, and by 1900 fully 200 pavilions had been established in 31 states, bringing lectures by the period's most eminent scholars and statesmen to thousands.

In 1888 Vincent's election as a bishop of the Methodist Church diverted him from popular culture. He served in New York and Kansas until his retirement in 1904 in Switzerland as director of Methodist interests in Europe. He spent his retirement lecturing and writing, usually on themes connected with Chautauqua. He died on May 9, 1920.