

A history of Methodism in Kentucky, by Rev. W.E. Arnold.

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there the next day, and visited almost every person who was sick, and prayed with them. He was taken ill on the morning of the 14th, and died at one o'clock that night. He suffered no pain, but died as if a small vein had been opened, and his life had leaked out. There was no one present but a few of his own family. His wife was extremely ill, and died a few hours after. He appeared to wish to take as little attention as possible—did not talk at all, but to inquire how his wife was—said not a word about dying, but remarked to his daughter that he wanted to be buried by Susanna, (a daughter who had died some years before). He and his wife lived together thirty-nine years, and were buried in one grave." (From a letter from his daughter to Lewis Garrett). A daughter and a granddaughter were stricken the next day, and shared a common grave, while still another daughter died of the scourge three days later.

We pause with reverence before the name of Francis Poythress.

Among the eight pioneers of Methodism in Kentucky and Tennessee in the year 1788, the name of Francis Poythress stands pre-eminent. By those intrepid heroes of the cross the foundation of Methodism was laid in those States, on which others have since built, and others are now building. Their names ought to be held in grateful remembrance by all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth; but among all, we are inclined to the opinion, there is not one of them to whom the members of our Church, in those States, owe a greater debt of gratitude than to Francis Poythress. (Rev. Thomas Scott.)

A Virginian by birth; of a wealthy family; the heir to a considerable estate; rather wild and reckless in youth; brought under deep conviction by the reproof of an intelligent and pious lady of his community, he determined to mend his ways, and began earnestly to seek

the salvation of his soul. But who was there to instruct him? Those were the days when spirituality was low in the Established Church, the prevailing denomination in that part of Virginia. He read his Bible, examined himself severely and sought peace in many ways, but did not find it. Finally hearing of Devereaux Jarratt, the evangelical minister of the Church of England, he visited him, and was entertained for some time under his hospitable roof. At length he found the peace that he sought. He soon began assisting Mr. Jarratt as he could, taking part in the great revival then in progress in that part of Virginia under Mr. Jarratt's evangelical preaching. It was not long ere he was preaching the gospel. This was before the Methodists had come into those parts, and he knew nothing about them. On one of his preaching excursions, however, he fell in with one of their preachers, who furnished him with a copy of the doctrines and discipline of the Methodists. He read them, and being convinced that they were founded on the Holy Scriptures, he joined the Methodists and was soon preaching among them. His conversion took place in 1772, one year before the first Methodist Conference was held in America. He was admitted among the traveling preachers in 1776, and sent to Carolina. For some reason, we know not what, his name does not appear in the Minutes of 1777, but in 1778, he is listed as one of the "Assistants," and assigned to Hanover circuit. He served various circuits until 1786, when he was ordained an elder, and at once put in charge of a District. Two years later he was brought to Kentucky by Bishop Asbury and placed in charge of the work in this great field. He remained the elder in all this vast western territory until 1797, when, on account of failing health, he is placed for one year on the supernu-

merary list. In 1798, he is in charge of the District in the Holston country, but in 1799, he returns to Kentucky and resumes his work as Presiding Elder here. In 1800, he is put in charge of a very large District in North Carolina, but before the end of the year he came back to Kentucky so completely broken in health that he was never able to do work again.

Poythress is described as having "the bearing of one who had been well brought up, his deportment being very gentlemanly. He was disposed to melancholy. He was an acceptable preacher, though not of the first order of talents. He was greatly gifted in prayer; when he prayed he seemed to bring heaven and earth together." The Rev. John Carr, of Tennessee, tells this anecdote concerning him:

When traveling in Middle Tennessee, which was in 1793 and years following, he sometimes found the table fare very rough; but he was never heard to complain of what was set before him. Knowing the destitution of the people, and being delicate in health, he carried with him a canister of tea. At one place he gave the canister to a good sister, that she might prepare for him a good cup of tea. She emptied the whole canister into water and gave it a good boiling as so much greens, and brought it to the table with an apology for not being able to boil it down sufficiently, when Poythress kindly remarked: "Why, sister, you have spoiled all my tea; it was not the leaves, but the juice that I wanted."

Such ignorance was not uncommon among a people who had come in contact with so little of the world, and enjoyed so few of the luxuries of life. Many a pioneer lived to an old age without ever seeing coffee or tea.

Poythress was about five feet, eight inches high, and heavily built. In early life he was a powerful man, and even in extreme old age and suffering from the severest

afflictions, his step was firm and his appearance commanding. He had a high sense of honor and obligation. Though he did not rank with the greatest preachers, he excelled as an administrator. Asbury once nominated him for election as Bishop.

During his stay in Kentucky, whenever Asbury could not be present, he always presided over the sessions of the Conference and stationed the preachers. He had been in this State but a little while until he saw the need of schools in this new country, and it was through his influence and efforts more than those of any other, that Bethel Academy was promoted and built. During his last year on this western District, he traveled over nearly all of Kentucky and Tennessee, and over parts of Ohio and Virginia. When he came to this field, he found in Kentucky and Tennessee a little over 500 members; and though his administration covered one of the most trying periods in our history, he left in these States about 2,500 members. It was he who directed the forces in this formative period of Methodism in Kentucky. He did indeed "endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." His excessive labors; his exposure; his long rides on horseback; the rude accommodations he found in the cabins in the backwoods; the rough fare; the perils of the wilderness; the dangers from wild beasts and savage men—all these broke down his strong physique, wrecked his nervous system and left him at last hopelessly insane! Symptoms of his mental derangement had been noticed at times for several years. He would occasionally lapse into a state of melancholy, and would be afflicted with strange and unfounded hallucinations. His sister, Mrs. Susan Pryor, lived in Jessamine county, about twelve miles south of Lexington, and when the complete wreck

of his noble mind had been wrought, he retired to her home, and there lingered until sometime in 1818, when death brought him a happy release. The Minutes of the old Western Conference testify to the love and esteem of his brethren. In the Minutes of 1801, we find this entry:

“Whereas Francis Poythress appears to be incapable of taking a station, it is agreed to by the Conference that his name shall stand on the Minutes among the Elders; and that he shall have a proportionable claim on the Conference for his support.” At the next Conference we find this item: “The Conference proceeded to take into consideration the critical, deranged state of unaccountability which Francis Poythress at present is in, and judge it best, for the safety of the Connection that his name shall be left off of the General Minutes. But at the same time are tenderly concerned for his support and welfare—and therefore Resolved, that his name shall stand on our Journal; and that he shall have a proportionable claim on the Western Conference for his support; and further it is our opinion that his name should be perpetuated on the Journals of this Conference, for the same purpose.” In 1803, the Journal states, “Francis Poythress stands on our Journal as a claimant for \$80.00. But it appears that he is able to support himself, and does not expect or wish his support from us. We therefore judge that he should not be considered as dependent on us.”

We have searched diligently for the grave of this good man, but have been unable to find it. It is somewhere in Jessamine county, though doubtless it is unmarked. If it can be found, the Methodists of Kentucky should place over his ashes a suitable monument to commemorate the services of one of its most laborious and efficient workers.

These men who came into this western wilderness in 1788 were men of mark. They had the grace of God in their hearts and iron in their blood. Their preaching was in power and demonstration of the Spirit.

They were not afraid in time of danger; they did not falter in the face of difficulties; they did not hesitate when sacrifices were required. To them, as to St. Paul, "to live was Christ, and to die was gain." A gracious revival sprang up in the wake of their labors. The flame was first kindled by Haw and Ogden, and continued to burn with greater intensity during this year. Burke says:

This band of young resolute soldiers of the cross united under two old and experienced veterans—Francis Poythress and James Haw. Providence opened their way, and they began to make some favorable impressions upon the minds and hearts of the people. They occupied the whole ground, and, with the assistance of the few local preachers who had been there before them, they carried the war into the camp of the enemy, and in a short time a powerful and extensive revival took place. Hundreds were added to the Church; and considering the situation of the country, surrounded by a wilderness, the Indians continually making depredations on the frontiers, and the people constantly harassed and penned up in forts and stations, it may be considered among the greatest revivals that was ever known. In this revival a number of wealthy and respectable citizens were added to the Church—the Hardins, Thomases, Hites, Lewises, Eastlands, Mastersons, Kavanaughs, Tuckers, Richardsons, Letemores, Browns, Garretts, Churchfields, Jefferses, Hoards, and numbers of others of respectable standing in society; and out of this revival was raised up some useful and promising young men, who entered the traveling connection, and many of them made full proof of their ministry, and lived many years to ornament the Church of God.

The General Minutes show that the membership was more than doubled this year—863 members in the Lexington and Danville circuits, and 225 in the Cumberland. During the progress of this gracious work, writing from the Cumberland country early in 1789, James Haw addressed a letter to Bishop Asbury, which, notwithstanding its length, we shall place before our

readers. It gives the best possible insight both into the character of the man and of the work that was going on. He says:

“Good news from Zion: the work of God is going on rapidly in the new world; a glorious victory the Son of God has gained, and he is still going on conquering and to conquer. Shout, ye angels! Hell trembles and heaven rejoices daily over sinners that repent. At a quarterly meeting held in Bourbon county, Kentucky, July 19 and 20, 1788, the Lord poured out his Spirit in a wonderful manner, first on the Christians, and sanctified several of them powerfully and gloriously, and, as I charitably hope, wholly. The seekers also felt the power and presence of God, and cried for mercy as at the point of death. We prayed with and for them, till we had reason to believe that the Lord converted seventeen or eighteen precious souls. Hallelujah, praise the Lord!

As I went from that, through the circuit, to another quarterly meeting, the Lord converted two or three more. The Saturday and Sunday following, the Lord poured out his Spirit again. The work of sanctification among the believers broke out again at the Lord's table, and the Spirit of the Lord went through the assembly like a mighty rushing wind. Some fell; many cried for mercy. Sighs and groans proceeded from their hearts; tears of sorrow for sin ran streaming down their eyes. Their prayers reached to heaven, and the Spirit of the Lord entered into them and filled fourteen or fifteen with peace and joy in believing. ‘Salvation! O the joyful sound! how the echo flies!’ A few days after, Brother Poythress came, and went with me to another quarterly meeting. We had another gracious season round the Lord's table, but no remarkable stir till after preaching; when, under several exhortations, some burst out into tears, others trembled, and some fell. I sprang in among the people, and the Lord converted one more very powerfully, who praised the Lord with such acclamation of joy as I trust will never be forgotten. The Sunday following, I preached my farewell sermon, and met the class, and the Lord converted three more. Glory be to his holy name.

The first round I went on Cumberland, the Lord converted six precious souls, and I joined three gracious Baptists to our Church; and every round, I have reason to believe, some sinners

are awakened, some seekers joined to society, and some penitents converted to God. At our Cumberland quarterly meeting, the Lord converted six souls the first day, and one the next. Glory, honor, praise, and power be unto God for ever! The work still goes on. I have joined two more serious Baptists since the quarterly meeting. The Lord has converted several more precious souls in various parts of the circuit, and some more have joined the society, so that we have one hundred and twelve disciples now in Cumberland—forty-seven of whom, I trust, have received the gift of the Holy Ghost since they believed; and I hope these are but the first of a universal harvest which God will give us in this country. Brother Massie is with me, going on weeping over sinners, and the Lord blesses his labors. A letter from brother Williamson, dated November 10, 1788, informs me that the work is still going on rapidly in Kentucky; that at two quarterly meetings since I came away, the Lord poured out his Spirit, and converted ten penitents, and sanctified five believers, at the first, and twenty more were converted at the second; indeed, the wilderness and the solitary places are glad, and the desert rejoices and blossoms as the rose, and, I trust, will soon become as beautiful as Tirza and comely as Jerusalem.

What shall I say more? Time would fail me to tell you all the Lord's doings among us. It is marvelous in our eyes. To him be glory, honor, praise, power, might, majesty, and dominion, both now and forever. Amen, and amen."

At the next Conference, that of 1789, the circuits remain the same as the preceding year, and much the same force is retained. The names of Benjamin Snelling and David Combs disappear, and those of Stephen Brooks and Joshua Hartley take their places. Stephen Brooks was no ordinary man. He was born on Cape Hatteras, N. C., but in early life removed with his father to Hyde county, in the same State. He was educated for a seaman's life, and spent some time on the waters, receiving a captain's commission. Though brought up a high-churchman, he was deeply convicted under the instrumentality of a Methodist preacher.