

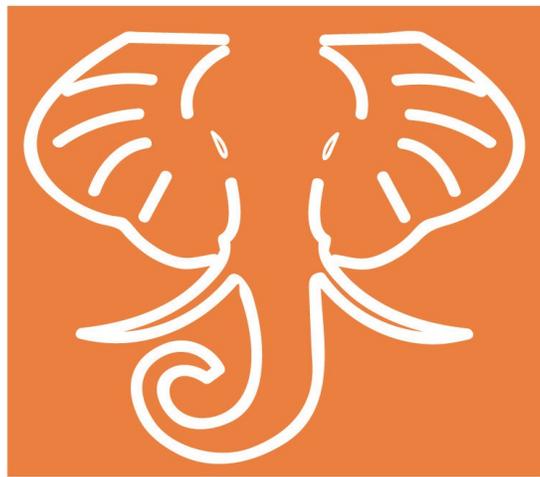
Sketches of western Methodism: biographical, historical, and miscellaneous. Illustrative of pioneer life. By Rev. James B. Finley. Ed. by W. P. Strickland.

Finley, James B. (James Bradley), 1781-1856.

Cincinnati : Printed at the Methodist book concern, for the author, 1855.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t20c4t94j>

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CHAPTER VI.

FRANCIS POYTHRESS.

WE have no means of ascertaining the time, or the place of the birth of the above-named pioneer preacher. From the Minutes we learn that he was received on trial, in the traveling connection, at the conference held in Baltimore in May, 1776. The conference was at that time in ecclesiastical connection with the British conference, and the preachers were all bound to yield implicit obedience to Mr. Wesley's authority, taking the doctrines and Discipline, as contained in the Minutes, for the sole rule of their conduct. The preachers were forbidden to administer any of the ordinances, and the people were required, with their pastors, to attend the Episcopal Church and receive the ordinances there, particularly those who resided in Maryland and Virginia. No preacher was allowed to reprint any of Mr. Wesley's books without his consent.

Some of the conversations which occurred at the conferences, and are recorded in the Minutes, are worthy of observation. Among others were the following: No preacher, who sustained the relation of a helper or assistant, was allowed to make any alterations in the circuit, or take in any new preaching-places, without consulting his superior. Every exhorter was prohibited from going to any place to exercise his gifts, except where directed. The preachers were required to meet the children once a fortnight, and examine the parents with regard to their conduct toward them. No local preacher was allowed to

preach without having a written permit every quarter. All preachers were required to rise at four o'clock—at the latest five o'clock. They were required to continue in close connection with the Church; that is, the Church of England, and request the clergy to administer the ordinances to their people. Traveling preachers who held slaves were required to give promise of freedom. All members who distilled grain into liquor were disowned. In regard to singing, all the preachers who had any knowledge of the notes were required to improve it by learning to sing true themselves, and keeping close to Mr. Wesley's tunes and hymns.

After his admission, young Poythress was appointed to Carolina circuit. In 1778 he was appointed to Hanover circuit, and the succeeding years, up to 1784, to Sussex, New Hope, Fairfax, Talbot, and Alleghany. In 1785, which was the year following the conference at which a separate ecclesiastical organization was agreed upon, and the societies assumed the name of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he was stationed in the city of Baltimore. In the year 1786 he was appointed presiding elder of a district composed of the following circuits; namely, Brunswick, Sussex, Amelia, Williamsburg, Orange, Bedford, and Hanover. The succeeding year he was presiding elder of a district composed of Guilford, Fairfax, New Hope, and Caswell circuits. In 1788 he was associated with James Haw as elder of a district embracing Lexington, Danville, and Cumberland. The following year he was alone on the above district, and continued from year to year, the district being enlarged from time to time by the addition of new circuits, till the year 1797, when, from excessive labors, occasioned by the most fatiguing travel and hardships, such as would break down any man of the present day, he was placed in a supernumerary relation, and John Kobler succeeded him

on the district. In 1797 he again entered the effective ranks, and was appointed elder of a district composed of New River, Russell, Holston, and Green. We give the names of the circuits composing the districts at that early day, because the districts had no name by which they could be otherwise designated. The practice of naming the districts was not adopted till the year 1801.

The next year he was sent back to his old district. In the year 1800 he was sent to a district in North Carolina, embracing fifteen circuits. His removal to a new field, among strangers, and the subjection, if possible, to greater hardships than he had endured on his former fields, alone and friendless, without a companion, save the companionship which he found at different and distant points among his brethren, preyed heavily upon his system, shattering his nerves, and making fearful inroads upon a mind naturally of a too contemplative, if not somber cast; and seasons of gloom and darkness gathered around him. He should at once have desisted, and sought that rest and society for which he so much longed, among the friends and companions of his youth; but, alas! the necessity that rested in those days upon a Methodist preacher, stern as fate, kept him at his post, and he toiled on till his shattered frame, like the broken strings of a harp, could only sigh to the winds that swept through it; and his mind, in deep sympathy with his brain, became alike shattered and deranged. The next year he came back to Kentucky, but the light of the temple was gone, and the eye which shot the fires of genius and intelligence, now wildly stared upon the face of old, loving, long-trying friends as though they were strangers. Here he remained till death released him and sent his spirit home. Poor Poythress! Bravely didst thou toil and endure hardness on the well-fought field. A campaign of twenty-four years of incessant toil in the gloomy wilds of the

west, away from friends and loved ones at home, proved too much for thy nature to bear. But thou art gone "where the wicked cease to trouble, and the weary are at rest."

The Rev. Thomas Scott, a personal friend of the deceased, and himself one of the early pioneers of western Methodism, has furnished, among other interesting biographical and historical sketches, an account of some personal reminiscences connected with the melancholy fate of this zealous and indefatigable itinerant, which we subjoin:

"Our acquaintance with him commenced in April, 1794, and continued without much interruption for about six years, during which period we learned from him the following particulars: On the death of his father he inherited a handsome personal and real estate; and being, in early life, thus left, without any one to control his actions, he yielded to the impulses of his passions, which were violent, and rushed into all the follies and vices of youth. The circumstance which brought him to review his past life, was the reproof of a lady of elevated standing in society. Her reproof carried conviction to his heart. He left her house in confusion, and on his way home resolved to mend his ways. He commenced reading the Scriptures and praying in secret—soon saw and felt the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and groaned to be released from its galling chain. That led him to inquire after those persons whom he supposed capable of instructing him in the right way; but for a long time he sought in vain. At length he heard of the Rev. Deveraur Janet, an Episcopalian clergyman of learning and deep piety, then residing in a remote part of Virginia, whom he visited, and with whom he remained a considerable time, hearing and receiving instruction. Having at length obtained redemption in the blood of Jesus, he soon became

sensible of his call to the ministry. He conferred not with flesh and blood, but immediately commenced his itinerant career, preaching the Gospel of the grace of God to all who would hear. This was prior to the time in which our Methodist preachers reached that part of Virginia in which he lived. On one of his preaching excursions through the southern parts of Virginia and North Carolina, he fell in with one of our traveling preachers—whose name we have forgotten—with whom he formed an acquaintance, who furnished him with the doctrines and Discipline of our Church, as drawn up by Mr. Wesley. These he read and attentively considered, and being convinced they were based on the Scriptures of divine revelation, he applied for admission, and was received into union and fellowship in the Church.

“The Minutes of the several annual conferences show all the circuits he traveled, except one, and districts over which he presided. They are as follows: 1776, Carolina. We are unable to name the circuit he traveled the following year; but from the facts that in 1778 he was received into full connection, and appointed to the charge of Hanover circuit, we infer that he traveled some circuit in 1777. In 1779, Sussex; 1780, New Hope; 1781, Fairfax; 1782, Talbot; and 1783, Alleghany. In that year, we believe, he extended his ministerial labors across the Alleghany Mountains on to the waters of the Little Youghiogeny. In 1784, Colvert; and 1785, Baltimore. In 1786 he was ordained an elder in the Church, and presided over the district composed of Brunswick, Sussex, and Amelia circuits. From the fact that in 1786 he was ordained an elder, we infer that in 1785 he was ordained a deacon; and if so, he was among the first of our American preachers who were ordained to that office. In 1787 he presided over the district composed of the circuits of Guilford, Halifax, New Hope, and Caswell, and in 1788

he was transferred to Kentucky; and, in conjunction with the Rev. James Haw, appointed to preside over the district composed of the Lexington, Danville, and Cumberland circuits. Haw, we believe, presided over the latter, and Poythress over the two former of these circuits. In 1799 Haw's functions as presiding elder ceased, and Poythress presided over the entire district. In 1790 Madison and Limestone circuits were formed, and added to his district. In 1791 the circuits south of the Kentucky river were reformed, the name of Madison being dropped, and that of Salt River substituted; and brother Poythress continued to preside over the district. In 1792 the following circuits were added to his district: Greenbrier, Cowpasture, Bottetourt, and Bedford. In 1793 the four circuits last named were taken from his district, but Hinkston circuit, then formed, was added to it. There was no other change made in the bounds of his district during the years 1794, 1795, and 1796, except that in this last-named year Shelby circuit was formed, and, together with Logan and Guilford, added to it. In 1797 Shelby circuit was dropped, and the Rev. John Kobler was appointed presiding elder, and the Rev. Francis Poythress supernumerary, over the district. In the fall of that year brother Kobler crossed over on the north-west side of the Ohio river, and formed the Miami circuit, and brother Poythress resumed his station on the district, over which he continued to preside till the end of that year. In 1798 the Rev. Francis Poythress and Jonathan Bird were appointed presiding elders of the district composed of New River, Russell, Holston, and Green circuits, and Rev. Valentine Cook was appointed presiding elder over the Kentucky district. Shortly after brother Cook's arrival in Kentucky—and we feel quite sure it was before he had completed one round on his district—he received instructions from

Bishop Asbury to take charge of Bethel Academy, then on the decline for want of a suitable teacher, and brother Poythress was instructed to take charge of the district. Cook, therefore, took charge of the Academy, Poythress of the district, and Bird remained on the station to which he had been appointed. In 1799 New River, Holston, and Russell, Green and Miami circuits were added to the Kentucky district, and brother Poythress was appointed presiding elder over it. Late in the fall of that year his bodily and mental powers gave way and fell into ruins. In 1800 he was, however, appointed presiding elder of the district composed of Morganton and Swanino, Yadin, Salisbury, Haw River, Guilford, Franklin, Caswell, Tar River, Newbern, Goshen, Wilmington, Contentney, Pamlico, Roanoke, Matamuskeet, and Banks, but his affliction rendered it impracticable for him to take the station assigned him.

“Upon inspecting the bound Minutes, page 245, it will be seen that the Rev. William M’Kendree was, in that year, appointed presiding elder of the district composed of Greenbrier, Bottetourt, Bedford, Orange, Amherst, Williamsburg and Hanover, and Gloucester circuits, and that no presiding elder is named for the Kentucky district. So soon as Bishop Asbury received information of the malady under which brother Poythress was suffering, he gave instructions to brother M’Kendree to proceed to Kentucky and take charge of the district; and about the latter end of the summer of that year brother M’Kendree came on to the district. In 1802 and 1803 the name of brother Poythress stands recorded in the Minutes among the elders, but without any station being assigned him; after which we anxiously sought for his name, but it was not there. We have heard that he died many years since, but when and how he died we are un-informed.

“Bishop Asbury visited Kentucky for the first time in 1790, after which he never visited that state—if we rightly remember—till subsequent to the year 1800; and during these periods brother Poythress presided over each annual conference which sat in Kentucky, and the stationing of the preachers and government of the societies within his district were almost exclusively confided to him by the Bishop.

“Bishop Asbury was an excellent judge of men. He was intimately acquainted with brother Poythress; and the stations to which he appointed him furnishes conclusive evidence of the estimate he set upon him as a man and Christian minister.

“Brother Poythress was grave in his deportment, and chaste in his conversation, constant in his private devotions, and faithful in the discharge of his ministerial duties. We have no recollection of his having ever disappointed a congregation, unless prevented by sickness or disease. As often as practicable he visited from house to house, instructed and prayed in the family. Among the preachers he, like most other men, may have had his particular favorites, but all were treated by him with due benevolence and Christian respect. He was unwearied in his efforts to unite the traveling and local ministry as a band of brothers, so that their united efforts might be exerted in furthering the cause of God. As the weight of all the Churches in his district rested upon him, he sensibly felt the responsibility of his station, and put forth his utmost efforts to discharge, with fidelity, these important trusts which had been confided to him. The education of the rising generation he deemed to be intimately connected with the interests of the Church, and the result of that conviction was the erection of Bethel Academy. The erection of that institution, we are quite certain, met the approbation of Mr. Asbury,

and a majority of the traveling and local preachers of that day.

“The conversational powers of brother Poythress were not of a high order; yet when he did engage in general conversation, he maintained his part with propriety, evincive of an extensive knowledge of men and things. His rank as a preacher was not much above mediocrity. He was, however, sound in the faith, in doctrine, in purity. There are many words in common use which he could not pronounce correctly; this we attributed to the loss of his teeth.

“He was—if we rightly remember—about five feet eight or nine inches in hight, and heavily built. His muscles were large, and when in the prime of life, we presume, he was a man of more than ordinary muscular strength. He dressed plain and neat. When we first saw him, we suppose, he had passed his sixtieth year. His muscles were quite flaccid, eyes sunken in his head, hair gray—turned back, hanging down on his shoulders—complexion dark, and countenance grave, inclining to melancholy. His step was, however, firm, and general appearance such as to command the respectful consideration of others. He possessed high, honorable feelings, and a deep sense of moral obligation. In general, he was an excellent disciplinarian. He endeavored to probe to the bottom each wound in the Church, in order that a radical cure might be effected; but would never consent to expel from the bosom of the Church those who evidenced contrition and amendment. And when free from the morbid action of his system, to which it becomes our painful duty to refer, we esteemed him to be a man of sound discriminating judgment. We, however, claim not for him exemption from error, the common frailty of man, and therefore concede to our excellent friend Daviess, of Kentucky, that he may have inflicted a wound

12*

on the character of the Rev. Benjamin Ogden. But we can not concede it as a fact that brother Poythress was influenced, in his conduct, by an impure or wicked motive. We were too long and intimately acquainted with him to harbor, for one moment, an idea so uncharitable and derogatory to his Christian character.

“We never had the pleasure of personal acquaintance with brother Ogden, but having heard him preach his last sermon east of the Mountains, in 1786, when on his journey, as a missionary to Kentucky, we read, with great satisfaction, Mr. Daviess’s vindication of his character. We, however, thought there were, in that vindication, some expressions a little too harsh, and calculated to lead others to an erroneous conclusion respecting the character of brother Poythress.

“Symptoms of insanity were, at times, discoverable in brother Poythress several years prior to the time he ceased to travel and to preach, and such may have been his situation at the time the unpleasant circumstance occurred to which brother Daviess refers. We, therefore, put it to him to say whether the veil of Christian charity ought to be drawn over actions induced by a morbid excitement of the system, materially affecting, at the time, his intellectual faculties.

“During the latter part of the summer, fall, and winter of 1794 and 1795, brother Poythress, at times, exhibited the appearance of a man whose mind was drawn off from surrounding objects; and in that situation he would remain for one or more hours, when his system appeared to react, and he would engage in conversation as usual. At other times he complained of giddiness and pain in his head, and his stomach and bowels appeared to be affected with flatulency and acrid eructations. A general listlessness, irksomeness, and disgust seemed to overwhelm him. His countenance appeared sad and sullen, and he

evinced an utter aversion and inability to engage in business of importance. At such times, he usually betook himself to bed, but did not appear to sleep soundly. These symptoms became more frequent during the forepart of the year 1795, and would sometimes last for hours. Near the close of the summer of 1795 the Rev. Aquilla Sugg, who traveled the Lexington circuit, in consequence of bad health was rendered incapable of performing effective service; and, at the request of brother Poythress, we took charge of the circuit till the ensuing spring. Our first quarterly meeting was held in a small log meeting-house, not far from Versailles, Woodford county. On Saturday brother Poythress arrived just before the time for commencing the public exercises—complained of being exceedingly unwell, and went to bed. In a few minutes he called, and said, ‘Brother Scott, you must conduct the quarterly meeting, I can take no part in the public exercises.’ On returning from meeting we found him still in bed, but finally prevailed on him to get up. We then walked out together, but had not proceeded far out of the hearing of others, when he suddenly stopped, and said, ‘Brother Scott, I am a ruined man; a conspiracy has been formed against me by my sister Prior, Mr. Willis Green, and brother Simon Adams. My sister Prior charges me with having kept back part of the price of some negroes I sold for her several years since; Mr. Willis Green accuses me with having embezzled part of the money I collected for Bethel Academy; and brother Adams accuses me with having taken advantage of him in the purchase of a horse; the officers of justice are now in pursuit of me. I shall soon be incarcerated in prison, my character ruined, and the Church disgraced.’ I assured him I knew each of those individuals to be his fast, adhering friend, and incapable of harboring a suspicion injurious

to his character, and that he might rest assured that they had not formed a conspiracy against him. But all I said had no effect, and he pertinaciously insisted that what he had said was true, and said, 'they were then engaged in drawing others into their conspiracy.' During that conversation his countenance exhibited a ghastly appearance, and his whole frame trembled. On returning to the house he again retired to bed, where he remained—if we rightly remember—with his head generally covered, till the next Monday morning, when he was again prevailed on to get out of bed. After he had taken some refreshments, we again walked out together, and I urged him to return home to his sister's, assured him no conspiracy had been formed against him, and that if all he imagined were true, it was far better for him promptly to meet the danger than to attempt to flee from it like a coward. That advice seemed to strike the right chord, it immediately vibrated, and after a few minutes he answered, 'It is, perhaps, best promptly to meet the danger, but I can not do so, unless you attend and conduct the quarterly meeting for me at Browder's meeting-house, near Bardstown, on next Saturday and Sunday. That meeting must not be neglected.' We promised to comply with his request, and he returned to his sister's. That was the first clear and unequivocal evidence of partial insanity which we recollect of having noticed in brother Poythress—insanity as it respected three most intimate friends; for the conspiracy, and the causes leading to it, which he supposed to exist, had no existence except in his own heated imagination, and, for the time being, it was found to be impracticable to remove those delusive ideas from his mind.

"We were confident no conspiracy had been formed against him, as he imagined, and still we entertained fears that, in the particular cases named, he had yielded

to the temptations of the archenemy of souls; and that a conviction of his crimes, and fear of detection had produced the effects we witnessed. Having, however, since that time, acquired some little knowledge of the symptoms which often exhibit themselves in partial insanity, the fears we then entertained have entirely vanished. We mention this, in order to show how extremely careful we ought to be, not to suffer suspicions injurious to the character of another to make a lodgment in our minds.

“Agreeably to promise, we attended the quarterly meeting, and in meeting brother Poythress he exclaimed, ‘Why, upon earth, did you suffer me to leave you? It was all delusion. My sister met me as usual.’ Early in the year 1797 he was confined by affliction; but whether his mind was affected during his affliction we are entirely uninformed. The last time we saw him was in the forepart of the winter of 1800. The balance of his mind was lost, and his body lay a complete wreck. His labors in the Church militant were at an end, but the fruits of his labors still remain.

“We are not aware that any hereditary taint existed, which, in its ultimate range, dethroned his reason; but we can readily imagine that the seeds of that dreadful malady were sown in his system by the constant exposures and sufferings during the war of the Revolution, and the twelve years he traveled and preached in the then almost wilderness of the west. 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 our 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."

In some notes appended by Samuel Williams, Esq., making a few alterations in the above narrative in regard to some dates and places, we have an item or two relating to the close of his life, which it may be proper to give. At times, we learn from these notes, he would converse rationally upon many subjects, while on other subjects he was hopelessly deranged. He was taken to his sister's, who lived twelve miles south of Lexington, Ky., where he remained till he died. He has gone, we trust, to that world where, in bright, unclouded intellect, he now gazes upon the scenes of eternal life.