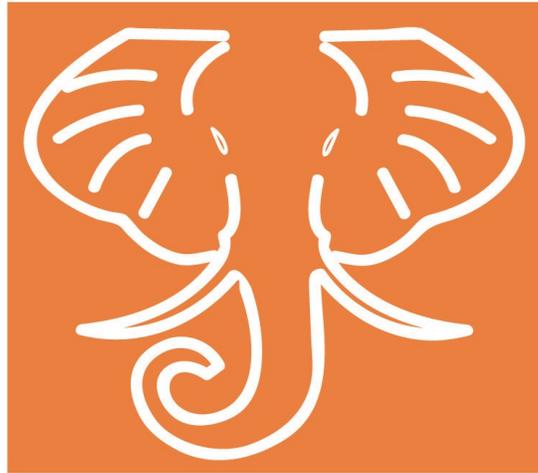


**Sketches of the pioneers of Methodism in North Carolina and Virginia.
By the Rev. M. H. Moore.**

Moore, Matthew H.
Nashville, Tenn., Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1884.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.090327769>

HathiTrust



www.hathitrust.org

Public Domain, Google-digitized

http://www.hathitrust.org/access_use#pd-google

We have determined this work to be in the public domain, meaning that it is not subject to copyright. Users are free to copy, use, and redistribute the work in part or in whole. It is possible that current copyright holders, heirs or the estate of the authors of individual portions of the work, such as illustrations or photographs, assert copyrights over these portions. Depending on the nature of subsequent use that is made, additional rights may need to be obtained independently of anything we can address. The digital images and OCR of this work were produced by Google, Inc. (indicated by a watermark on each page in the PageTurner). Google requests that the images and OCR not be re-hosted, redistributed or used commercially. The images are provided for educational, scholarly, non-commercial purposes.

FRANCIS POYTHRESS.

“**T**HE righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart.” Churches, as well as republics, are ungrateful; and in nothing is this spirit of ingratitude more painfully and more clearly revealed than in our forgetfulness of the dead. Even in North Carolina, where he was one of the first preachers of Methodism, and one of the three circuit-riders sent to the first field formed within her bounds, the name of Francis Poythress is little known—so little known that it falls as an unfamiliar sound upon many a Methodist ear. The man who was among the very first to introduce and carry forward the Wesleyan movement in Virginia and North Carolina, and who was foremost in the heroic little band who planted the standard of the cross on the other side of the Alleghanies; the man whom Asbury earnestly endeavored to have elevated to the office of bishop, and whom Stevens declares to have been “a giant among his greatest compeers;” the man who deliberately renounced the ease and luxury of wealth and social position to endure the hardships and undergo the toils of the pioneer ministry, and who at last broke down, mentally and physically, under the superabundance of his cares and labors, has been well-nigh forgotten. We reap the fruits of the labors of such men; we enjoy the heritage their self-sacrifice and their sufferings won for us—let us tread lightly over their graves; let us raise over their resting-places stones that will commemorate their deeds and express our veneration; let us gather from the fast receding past the stories of their toils and triumphs—they *made* history, it behooves us to *write* it.

Francis Poythress was a native of Virginia. Born of wealthy parents, he inherited large estates and occupied a high social position. But he was a spoiled child of fortune, and like so many others in similar circumstances, he early

fell into dissipated habits, and gave little promise of ever doing service for the Church or the world. While pursuing his wild course, he was, on one occasion, sharply reproved for his conduct by a lady, like himself, of high social rank. The reproof was timely. It proved an arrow of conviction, reaching his heart and causing him to reflect. He became alarmed for his soul's safety. His past sins rose up as a mountain before him, and his soul was burdened with a consciousness of guilt. For some time he wandered in darkness. There were none around him to whom he could go for comfort or advice. Finally, he heard of the saintly Rev. Devereux Jarratt, who was preaching of regeneration and adoption on Bath parish. To him he went for instruction, and by him he was effectually led to the foot of the cross and pointed to the sinner's Friend. Light poured upon his soul and darkness fled; the "spirit of heaviness" was exchanged for the "garment of praise;" and a joy "unspeakable and full of glory" filled his heart. And with this new-found joy came the conviction that he must preach. He did not hesitate; he was not disobedient to the divine command; he did not falter at the sight of the cross he was to take up and bear until his physical and mental powers should fail beneath it. He began at once to labor with Jarratt in calling the people to holiness of life.

About this time, George Shadford, with four other preachers, was thundering the law of Sinai and echoing the strains of calvary on Brunswick Circuit. One of the greatest revivals recorded in the annals of Methodism was the result. The flame swept every thing before it. Nothing like it had ever before been seen in Virginia; perhaps nothing like it has ever been seen there since. The most hardened sinners stood aghast at the new and strange power that attended the meetings, and then fell to the earth and cried for mercy. It amounted to a revolution. Francis Asbury hastened

from Norfolk to assist in the work and swell the triumphant shout. Under these circumstances a quarterly-meeting was held on this circuit, November 7, 1775, and here Francis Poythress entered the itinerancy. He brought into the ranks of the thundering legion a restless, passionate, toilsome love for the Master, and a burning desire for the spiritual elevation of mankind that was to lead him through danger and labor to the utmost limit of his power of endurance.

He was first appointed to the Carolina Circuit. We are accustomed to say that this was the first circuit formed within the bounds of this State; but the reader must remember that circuits were not formed then as now; the boundary lines were not defined as now; there was no danger of one preacher encroaching upon another's field; there were no churches awaiting the weekly service, no folds anticipating the tender shepherd's loving care. Methodism was "Christianity in earnest." It was no hospital for sick folks to be petted and nursed in, but to "join society" meant to fall into line and move forward. Poythress, Dromgoole, and Tatum understood their marching orders. The order was, in substance, just this: "Through the preaching of Pilmoor and Williams, and a few local preachers, such as Green Hill, we have six hundred and eighty-three members scattered over North Carolina; go over and possess the land." And they went; went in the name of the Master; went in search of the perishing; went to attack everywhere the forces of sin; went expecting to "possess the land." "All things are possible to him that believeth." That was the battle-cry, and every true man among them believed it. It nerved every heart, and baptized that little band of heroes and martyrs with a power by which—figuratively, at least—they "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were

made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."

After opening the way in North Carolina, we find Poythress traveling the Hanover and Sussex circuits in Virginia, New Hope in North Carolina, and Fairfax in Virginia. In 1783 we find him pioneering the way and bearing the banner of Methodism across the Alleghanies to the waters of the Youghiogeny. At this day we will have to draw upon our imagination to form any correct idea of the sufferings he endured in these wilds; but success crowned his efforts, and the way was opened for others to follow.

In 1786 we find him presiding elder over Brunswick, Sussex, and Amelia circuits in Virginia, and in 1787 over Guilford, Halifax, and New Hope and Caswell circuits in North Carolina. The greatest part of his labors were now to be spent in the wilds of Tennessee and Kentucky. Of his work in the latter State, Dr. Redford, in his "History of Methodism in Kentucky," says: "He was more intimately identified with the rise and progress of Methodism in Kentucky than any other minister. For ten consecutive years he had charge of the Kentucky District, and, in the absence of Bishop Asbury, presided over the Annual Conferences. 'Grave in his deportment, chaste in his conversation, constant in his private devotions, and faithful in the discharge of his ministerial duties,' he exerted an influence for Methodism, and contributed to its success in Kentucky, to an extent that can be claimed for no other man. When we recount his excessive and constant labors through twenty-four years, having 'never been known to disappoint a congregation, unless prevented by sickness or disease,' with the weight of so many churches resting upon him, we are not surprised that his physical strength should have given way; and to the Church it is a cause for gratitude to God that his noble intellect did not become impaired in the morn or

noon of life. It was not until he had entered 'its sear and yellow leaf' that he gave any indications of the overthrow of his reason."

The following incident relative to him, and illustrating the habits of life on the frontier at that time, we quote from an interesting little volume of reminiscences, entitled "Early Times in Middle Tennessee:"

"At that day our fare in this country was extremely rough, as already observed; but I never heard the old elder complain of any thing set before him. One incident I must mention. Knowing our destitution, and being quite weakly, he had provided himself with a canister of tea, which he carried with him. One night, having stopped at the house of a brother, he gave the canister to the good sister, with a request that she would make some tea for him. She took it to the kitchen, and having poured the leaves into a vessel, she gave them a thorough boiling; then, putting them into a pewter plate, she brought them and set them before her guest. This done, she began, in the kindness of her heart, to apologize to the old elder because she could not *boil the tea down*. He looked at it, and simply said: 'Why, sister, you have spoiled all my tea; it was the broth I wanted.' You may think it strange that a married woman should be so ignorant, but it was even the case. In fact, I assure you, when I was married I do not believe I had drank a half-dozen cups of coffee, and I know not that I had ever seen any specimen of imported tea."

And there was danger to be encountered, as well as hardships to be endured, on these fields. The writer just quoted—himself an eye-witness—observes: "We cannot but observe with wonder and praise how the providence of God guarded and preserved those bold itinerants, while they took their lives in their hands and went forth preaching the gospel from station to station, and from neighborhood to neigh-

borhood, even where the people had settled away from the forts. In the midst of all the dangers of the day—the war with the Indians raging, and blood flowing freely on every hand—not one of the preachers was killed; and I know not a single instance of a failure to fill an appointment, though frequently we had to guard them from place to place, and I have myself been employed for five or six days together; and this, too, at times when the Indians were in the habit of lying in ambush near the paths leading from fort to fort. Surely, those were seasons of peril, but the providence of God preserved those men of God.”

In 1797 Asbury warmly recommended to the Conference at Wilbraham the election of Poythress to the office of bishop, but they declined solely on the ground that that was a matter to be decided only by the General Conference.

Poythress was a warm advocate of the cause of education, and was earnest and persistent in his efforts to enforce upon the Church her duty to train her children mentally as well as morally. Stevens says: “He was the chief founder of the first Methodist seminary in the West—the Bethel Academy, in Jessamine county, Kentucky. Its edifice was a large brick structure of two stories, and it had incurred a considerable debt, which weighed down his noble mind till it sunk in ruins. All efforts of himself, Valentine Cook, and other co-laborers, to retrieve the institution failed, and Poythress lingered a wreck like his favorite project.”

Mr. Finley, in his “Sketches of Western Methodism,” says: “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

*The fifteen circuits mentioned above were: Morganton and Swaino, Yadkin, Salisbury, Haw River, Guilford, Franklin, Caswell, Tar River, New Berne, Goshen, Wilmington, Contentney, Pamlico, Roanoke, Mattamuskeet, and Banks.

greater hardships than he had endured in former fields, without a companion save the companionship which he gained 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 frame, 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 faces 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 hardships on the well-fought field. A campaign of twenty-five 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."

His intimate personal friend Judge Scott, of Ohio, himself a pioneer Methodist preacher, says of him:

"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. 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 the 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. He was about five feet eight or nine inches in height, and heavily built. His muscles were large, and when in prime of life 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 his shoulders, complexion dark, and countenance grave, inclining to melancholy. His step was, however, firm, and his general appearance such as to command respect. He possessed high, honorable feelings, and a deep sense of moral obligation. In general, he was an excellent disciplinarian. Among the eight pioneers of Methodism in Kentucky and Tennessee in the year 1788, the name of Francis Poythress stands preëminent. By these intrepid heroes of the cross the foundation of Methodism was laid in those States, on which others have since built, and others are 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."

At the Western Conference of 1802, it was intimated that he was in "a critical state of unaccountability," and ordered

that his name be "left off the general minutes," while it was agreed that it should be retained on their journal. And so his name disappeared from the minutes without a word of explanation. In 1810, Asbury, traveling through Kentucky, made an entry in his journal that seemed also to reflect upon his character, and these two facts made the impression upon the public that he had apostatized. Fortunately for the justice of history, the matter was cleared up by the bishop's traveling companion, the Rev. Henry Boehm. He says:

"On Monday we visited an old minister, one of the pioneers of the West, and the bishop makes this melancholy record—I never read it without pain: 'This has been an awful day to me. I visited Francis Poythress, if thou be he; but O how fallen!' Perhaps no record in his journals has been so little understood as this, and none is more liable to be misinterpreted. Some have supposed that he had fallen like wretched apostates who have made shipwreck of the faith; but it was not so, and the bishop would not knowingly or willingly have done the unfortunate brother an injustice. My journal reads thus: 'Monday 15, we went with Brother Harris to see Francis Poythress, one of our old preachers. *He has been for ten years in a state of insanity, and is still in a distressed state of mind.*' This is the record I made over fifty years ago, and it was italicized as the reader now sees it. Francis Poythress was one of the leaders of our Israel. He was received into the traveling connection at the third Conference, held in 1776, with Freeborn Garrettson, Joseph Hartley, Nicholas Watters, and others. He was a pioneer of the West. In 1790, John Tunnell dying, Francis Poythress was appointed elder at the West, having five large circuits on his district, and on them were Wilson Lee, James Haw, and Barnabas McHenry. We have not space to trace his history. His excessive labors shattered

his system, and his body and intellect were both injured. About the year 1800 he became deranged, and a gloom settled down upon him not to be removed. When Asbury saw him, he was shocked, contrasting his former look with his appearance then. He was then living with his sister, twelve miles below Lexington. Bishop Asbury never saw him any more; death soon came to the relief of poor Francis Poythress, and none who knew him doubt that he is among the clear, unclouded intellects of the upper and better world."

He maintained, through all the privations of the frontier ministry, "the bearing of one who had been well raised, his deportment being very gentlemanly." He was particularly gifted in prayer, and it is said that when he led in intercession "it seemed that heaven and earth were coming together." The last years of his life were spent at the house of his sister, Mrs. Susannah Pryor, in Jessamine county, Kentucky. Here, after long years of mental derangement and bodily suffering, a relieving light broke upon his last hours, and in 1818 he entered into rest. Eternity may reveal a touch of romance—a story of human love—in the simple narrative of the reproof he received from a lady, and which drove him to Christ and the ministry; but if so, the stone of oblivion now hides it in the grave of the past.

JOHN EASTER.

IN the course of these Sketches we have had occasion to remark upon the peculiar type of oratory which the Wesleyan movement developed in America. The "burden" which the pioneers felt to rest upon them, the "woe" pronounced against their unfaithfulness, and above all the great love for souls that their religion kindled in their hearts, and the peril—the fearful peril—in which they saw the world to lie, developed an earnest, thrilling, overwhelm-