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# Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers

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LIVES OF  
VIRGINIA BAPTIST MINISTERS.

By James B. Taylor, Pastor Second Baptist Church, Richmond.  
1837. pp. 444. small 8vo.

There is one thing in this book, that we like particularly: it is, that it divides among *eighty* persons, a volume such as we too often see devoted to the biography of a single man, no whit more worthy of commemoration than seventy-nine of these eighty. It is a praiseworthy triumph over the epidemic cacœthes of book-making: and we hereby tender our acknowledgments to the amiable and pious author, for not having made each of these his deceased brethren, the subject of a separate tome, as large as this which he has constructed to their united memories. May his example be followed by many hereafter, when tempted to palm upon the public their five hundreds of pages, about the single lives of good people, who while they lived were never heard of a day's journey from home, and whose memories are as barren as those of Pope's Parish Clerk, or Johnson's Broomstick.

Several of the men spoken of in these 'short and simple annals,' were known to us, either personally, or by reputation: and we grew nearly to man's estate under the ministry (though not in the church) of one among them. This circumstance, and our liking, fostered by early, and frequent, and kindly intercourse, for many of their persuasion, and for some parts of their worship,—make the present volume rather interesting to us. Some of the biographies—those of Shubael Stearns, Robert B. Semple, Abner W. Clopton, Samuel Harris, and Lott Cary, for instance—even independently of such associations, might interest almost any thinking and benevolent mind.

To convey an idea of the matter and manner of the book, we present an abridgment of the first life it contains; with some extracts. There are passages, which fastidious readers may deem of too nasal a tone; and some occurrences are described, in which other readers will perhaps discern a strong affinity to the phenomena of animal magnetism.

SHUBAEL STEARNS, whose name (his biographer informs us) "will be had in everlasting remembrance,"—and certainly, it is a remarkable name—was born in Boston, in 1706. His father too was named Shubael; his mother's maiden name was Larriford. Of his early life, little or nothing is known. About 1740, an extensive revival of religion occurred in New England, through the agency of Whitefield and others, who, with their followers, were called New Lights, and 'Separates.' These Mr. Stearns joined, 1745. Soon

becoming "impressed with the obligation to preach the Gospel," he entered upon the work. "He continued with the Pedobaptists until 1751, when, examining the word of God, he became convinced, that in failing to submit to the ordinance of immersion, he had neglected a most important command of the Redeemer. The futility of infant Baptism was also discovered, and he determined to take up his cross, be baptized, and unite himself with the Baptists. He was immersed by Elder Wait Palmer, at Tolland, Connecticut." Mr. S. labored in New England for two or three years; but "soon became restless in contemplating other portions of our country, which were destitute of the preached word. He panted to carry the news of redeeming mercy, where they had been as yet but partially proclaimed. He labored under a most solemn impression that it was his duty to travel more extensively. Accordingly, he left his native state, and pursued his course in a southwesterly direction, scarcely knowing whither he went. That he was under Divine guidance, was proved by subsequent events." At length he reached Virginia, and dwelt preaching, awhile, in Berkeley and Hampshire counties, where he was eminently useful.

Next, he settled permanently in Guilford county, North Carolina—attracted by 'the great spiritual desolation which prevailed' there. His labors appear to have prospered. 'Such was the anxiety to hear the Gospel preached, that people would frequently travel a day's journey to attend a religious meeting.' Mr. Stearns and his party introduced doctrines quite new in that region—the doctrines of 'being born again'—conviction—and conversion.

"But their manner of preaching was, if possible, much more novel than their doctrines. The Separates, in New England, had acquired a very warm and pathetic address, accompanied by strong gestures, and a *singular tone of voice*. Being often deeply affected themselves when preaching, correspondent affections were felt by their pious hearers, which were frequently expressed by *tears, trembling, screams, and exclamations of grief and joy*. All these, they brought with them into their new habitation, at which, the people were greatly astonished, having never seen things on this wise before. Many mocked, but the power of God attending them, many also trembled. In process of time, some of the inhabitants became converts, and bowed in obedience to the Redeemer's sceptre. These unting their labors with the others, a powerful and extensive work commenced, and Sandy Creek Church soon swelled from 16 to 606 members."

Mr. Stearns died in November, 1771; after having 'travelled extensively in North Carolina and Virginia, and been instrumental in doing much good.'

The following account of his personal gifts, explains not unsatisfactorily, the efficacy of his preaching: and the two cases of Tidence Lane and Elnathan Davis, certainly have a striking family likeness to those reported by Col. Stone, and Mr. Charles Poyer:

"Mr. Stearns was a man of small stature, but of good natural parts, and sound judgment. Of learning, he had but a little share, yet was pretty well acquainted with books. His voice was musical, and strong, which he managed in such a manner, as one while to make soft impressions on the heart, and *fetch tears from the eyes in a mechanical way*; and anon, to *shake the very nerves*; and *throw the animal system into tumults and perturbations*. All the Separate Baptists copied after him in tones of voice, and actions of body; and some few exceeded him. His character was indisputably good, both as a man, a christian, and a preacher. In his eyes was something very penetrating; there seemed to be a meaning in every glance. Many sto-

ries have been told respecting the enchantments of his eyes and voice; but the two following examples we give with the more confidence, because the subjects of them, viz: Tidence Lane and Elnathan Davis, were men of sense and reputation, and afterwards became distinguished ministers of the Baptist Society.

"When the fame of Mr. Stearn's preaching (said Mr. Lane) had reached the Yadkin, where I lived, I felt a curiosity to go and hear him. Upon my arrival, I saw a venerable old man sitting under a peach tree with a book in his hand, and the people gathering about him. He fixed his eyes upon me immediately, which made me feel in such a manner as I never had felt before. I turned to quit the place, but could not proceed far. I walked about, sometimes catching his eyes as I walked. My uneasiness increased, and became intolerable. I went up to him, thinking that a salutation and shaking hands would relieve me; but it happened otherwise. I began to think that he had an evil eye, and ought to be shunned; but shunning him, I could no more effect, than a bird can shun a rattle-snake, when it fixes its eyes upon it. When he began to preach, my perturbations increased, so that nature could no longer support them, and I sunk to the ground."

"Mr. Lane afterwards became a very useful Baptist minister, and was one of the first of the denomination who removed to Tennessee, where he administered, until his death, with reputation and success.

"Elnathan Davis had heard that one John Steward was to be baptized such a day, by Mr. Stearns. Now this Steward being a very large man, and Stearns of small stature, he concluded there would be some diversion, if not drowning; therefore, he gathered about eight or ten of his companions in wickedness, and went to the spot. Mr. Stearns came, and began to preach. Elnathan went to hear him, while his companions stood at a distance. He was no sooner among the crowd, than he perceived some of the people *tremble, as if in a fit of the ague*; he felt and examined them, in order to find if it were not a dissimulation; meanwhile, one man leaned on his shoulder, weeping bitterly; Elnathan, perceiving he had wet his new white coat, pushed him off, and ran to his companions, who were sitting on a log at a distance. When he came, one said, 'Well, Elnathan, *what do you think now of these people?*' affixing to them a profane and reproachful epithet. He replied, 'There is a trembling and crying spirit among them, but whether it be the spirit of God or the devil, I don't know; if it be the devil, the devil go with them, for I will never more venture myself among them.' He stood awhile in that resolution; but the enchantment of Stearn's voice drew him to the crowd once more. He had not been long there before the *trembling seized him also*; he attempted to withdraw, but his strength failing, and his understanding being confounded, he, with many others, *sunk to the ground*. When he came to himself, he found nothing in him but dread and anxiety, bordering on horror. He continued in this situation some days, and then found relief by faith in Christ. Immediately he began to preach conversion work, raw as he was, and scanty as his knowledge must have been."

Many persons are little aware of the extent to which religious persecution once existed in Virginia, and others of the Southern states. About the middle of the last century, there were laws requiring all persons to attend worship every Sunday at the *established church*, on pain of fine and imprisonment; and making it penal to attend any Dissenters' place of worship, unless it were one licensed by the Governor and council, in a manner prescribed. The Baptists appear to have been the especial victims of this tyranny. They were not only harassed by oppressive enforcements of those unjust laws; but were subjected, moreover, to unnumbered lawless interruptions, and violent personal outrages from brutal men, while preaching or worshipping after the dictates of conscience. To be pelted with stones, dragged from the pulpit, beaten with clubs, and thrown into prisons,—were the ordinary and expected consequences of a Baptist Minister's preaching with the zeal which marked his sect. The constancy those men displayed, in braving insult, pain, and death, for what

they deemed the truth, entitled them to all the esteem which martyrs everywhere have earned : and we doubt not, that the wrongs they endured, enlisted them with deeper enthusiasm and more perfect unanimity under the banner of religious as well as political freedom ; and contributed largely to its final triumph.—By the way, contemplating these persecutions, ought we not to check the proneness common in the southern states, to taunt New England with bigotry and persecution ? Ought it not somewhat to lessen our abhorrence of the mote in our brother's eye,—to find that we have at least as thumping a one in our own ?

A few more extracts, displaying samples of the persecutions we allude to, will close this article. The first we shall cite, occurred in Georgia ; and is told in the life of DANIEL MARSHALL. Being on a visit to that state as an itinerant preacher,

"While in prayer, he was seized, in the presence of his audience, for preaching in the parish of St. Paul ; and made to give security for his appearance in Augusta, on the following Monday, to answer this charge. Accordingly, he stood a trial, and after his meekness and patience were sufficiently exercised, he was ordered to come no more, as a preacher, into Georgia."

DALTON LANE, another of the Baptist preachers, besides being threatened by the magistracy and others, was once pursued by his own father, with a deadly weapon.

SAMUEL HARRISS held a prominent station in society—was sheriff, justice of the peace, burgess for the county, and colonel in the militia,—and therefore might have expected toleration in whatever religious course he chose to pursue. Yet he, becoming a Baptist and a preacher, was more than once dealt with by persecutors. In Culpeper county,

"He was once arrested and carried into court as a disturber of the peace. In court, a Captain Williams vehemently accused him as a vagabond, a heretic, and a mover of sedition everywhere. Mr. Harriss made his defence. But the court ordered that he should not preach in the county again, for the space of twelve months ; or be committed to prison. The colonel told them that he lived two hundred miles from thence ; and that it was not likely he should disturb them again, in the course of one year. Upon this he was dismissed. From Culpeper he went into Fauquier, and preached at Carter's Run. \* \* \* On his return he called at Capt. Thomas Clanahan's, in the County of Culpeper, where there was a meeting. While certain young ministers were preaching, the word of God began to burn in Col. Harriss's heart. When they finished, he arose and addressed the congregation : 'I partly promised the devil, a few days past, at the court-house, that I would not preach in this county again in the term of a year. But the devil is a perfidious wretch, and covenants with him are not to be kept ; and therefore I will preach.' He preached a lively, animating sermon. The court disturbed him no more.

"On one occasion, in Orange County, he was pulled down as he was preaching, and dragged about by the hair of the head, and sometimes by the leg. His friends rescued him. On another time, he was knocked down by a rude fellow, while he was preaching. But he was not dismayed by these, or any other difficulties."

JOHN WALLER, of Spottsylvania, was bred to the law ; but turned out a thorough profligate—gaming, drinking, and swearing, so that he acquired the sobriquet of *Swearing Jack Waller*, to distinguish him from others of the same name. It was a common remark, that 'there could be no *deviltry* among the people, unless Swearing Jack was at the head of it.' No wonder, therefore, that he was also 'sometimes called the Devil's

Adjutant, to muster his troops' : and he was once arrested under three warrants at the same time, on account of one uproar. To complete his 'deviltry,' he was a furious persecutor of the Baptists. Yet he, himself, became converted, by the preaching of Lewis Craig, whom he had persecuted ; was baptized ; and soon after began to preach. His zeal now, was proportioned to his former profligacy : and he preached with so much energy, as to be considered a fanatic, whom it was necessary to curb. The persecutions he suffered 'in several counties, were of the most painful character.' The following letter, written during an imprisonment of forty-six days in Middlesex jail, sets forth the facts attending one of these persecutions, more vividly than any description at second hand could do :

"*Urbanna Prison, Middlesex County, Aug. 12, 1771.*

"Dear Brother in the Lord,—At a meeting which was held at brother McCain's, in this County, last Saturday, whilst brother William Webber was addressing the congregation, from James li, 18, there came running towards him, in a most furious rage, Captain James Montague, a magistrate of the county, followed by the parson of the parish, and several others, who seemed greatly exasperated. The magistrate, and another, took hold of brother Webber, and dragging him from the stage, delivered him, with brethren Wafford, Robert Ware, Richard Falkner, James Greenwood, and myself, into custody, and commanded that we should be brought before him for trial. Brother Wafford was severely scourged, and brother Henry Street received one lash, from one of the persecutors, who was prevented from proceeding to farther violence by his companions ; to be short, I may inform you that we were carried before the above mentioned magistrate, who, with the parson and some others, carried us, one by one, into a room, and examined our pockets and wallets, for fire-arms, &c. charging us with carrying on a mutiny against the authority of the land. Finding none, we were asked if we had license to preach in this county ; and, learning we had not, it was required of us to give bond and security not to preach any more in the county, which we modestly refused to do, whereupon, after dismissing brother Wafford, with a charge to make his escape out of the county by twelve o'clock the next day, on pain of imprisonment ; and dismissing brother Falkner, the rest of us were delivered to the sheriff, and sent to close jail, with a charge not to allow us to walk in the air until court day. Blessed be God, the sheriff and jailor have treated us with as much kindness as could have been expected from strangers. May the Lord reward them for it. Yesterday we had a large number of people to hear us preach ; and, among others, many of the great ones of the land, who behaved well, while one of us discoursed on the new birth. We find the Lord gracious and kind to us beyond expression, in our afflictions. We cannot tell how long we shall be kept in bonds ; we therefore beseech, dear brother, that you and the church supplicate night and day for us, our benefactors, and our persecutors.

"I have also to inform you that six of our brethren are confined in Caroline jail, viz : Brethren Lewis Craig, John Burrus, John Young, Edward Herndon, James Goodrick and Bartholomew Cheming. The most dreadful threatnings are raised in the neighboring counties against the Lord's faithful and humble followers. Excuse haste. Adieu.

JOHN WALLER."

Several others of the men whose histories are told by Mr. Taylor, suffered similar violences ; too many to be here recited. We close the volume, with a commendation of its curious facts, and no less curious phrasology, to the reader who seeks half a day's amusement : but with a deep and earnest pressing home of the stern and instructive lessons it conveys, to him who doubts the danger of entrusting power to any sect or class,—whether holy or profane. Other lessons, too, it conveys : but they all shrink to trifles, beside *that* one.