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Abel Turner, The Life and Travels of Abel Turner

1839

451 p. (0.2 linear feet)

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As a young man in Foxcroft, Maine, Abel Turner was caught up in the evangelical revivals and converted to Free Will Baptism, becoming a minister by the age of 21. Beginning in the backwoods settlements, Turner spent the better part of a decade attempting to "convert sinners" in Piscataquis and Penobscot Counties and the in the Burned-Over District of New York state, from Utica to Penn Yan and Cattaraugus County.

Written for his wife, Abel Turner's long and detailed autobiography is a remarkable record of a young Free Will Baptist minister's labors during the Second Great Awakening. Beginning with his childhood in Maine and his conversion experience, the manuscript provides insight into Turner's experiences preaching in the rough-hewn interior settlements of Maine and the Burned-Over

District of New York from roughly 1821 through 1839. In addition to some wonderful commentary on evangelical religion in the heart of the Awakening and on Turner's own spiritual development, the memoir includes fascinating descriptions of the towns and people he met along the way.

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Background on Abel Turner

Born in Pembroke, Massachusetts, on March 14, 1811, one of eight children born to Adam and Daphny (of Daffy) Bradman Turner, Abel Turner moved with his family to Foxcroft, Maine, in 1814, a new settlement in the far northeast of the state. Turner's father is supposed to have settled in a small log cabin on lot #16 in the 4th range, and soon after their arrival, Adam's third son Adam B. Turner was born followed in 1818 by his fourth daughter Betty B. Turner.

Precocious and stirred by the spirit, Turner was visited by dreams of life after death early in life and though raised a strict Calvinist, he began exploring Universalism after hearing a preacher. At eighteen, however, he attended a revival in Guilford, about thirty miles southwest of Foxcroft, where he wrote, "many with whom I had formerly been acquainted turned to the Lord." Through these revival meetings, Turner soon joined the Free Will Baptists, beginning his own ministry by the age of 21. During the early years of his ministry, Turner traveled throughout central Maine, from Moosehead Lake through Piscataquis and Penobscot Counties, trying to "convert sinners" in isolated settlements and logging camps, and at one point, passing an Indian village:

As we passed up the river we saw a few log huts where resided a few poor Indians, the aborigines of our country. Poor Indian! We passed their burying grounds where they had just buried on of their numbers. As I passed this place I could but reflect upon the unhappy condition. They had got to leave their lands and ashes of their fathers in about three years! O unhappy race! How mournfully must these poor people leave the hills and vales, streams and woods of their nativity. How will the memory of these scenes linger upon their thoughts as they take the last look of there pleasant homes to journey to the far West.

Turner's itinerancy had barely begun, and for nearly a decade, he preacher all across the Burned-Over District of New York. He left Maine initially to travel to New York city in 1831 to visit a brother who had contracted cholera. "While confined to his room," he wrote, his brother "said he counted thirty coffins carried by his house to the silent home of the dead! Such were the ravages of death in that city." But after a brief visit, Turner headed to Utica, traveling along the Erie Canal which he found "rather unpleasant." "This is the wickedest place that I ever saw;" he wrote, "especially for swearing. There is nothing so strange in this since there is some thousand groceris and taverns on this canell! If parents want their boys to learn all manner of wickedness let them send them on the canell!" In Utica itself, conditions were even worse:

We arrived in Utica a few days after the Anti Slavery Convention had been broken up by a mob. It appears that some in the city were opposed to there meeting in the place; and excited the Irishmen who were to work on the railroads just above there to come to their aid; with clubs, stones, brickbats, etc. and thus hundreds of the best men in the State were pisically driven from the city; for the crime of meeting to discuss and adopt the best means of liberarting millions of American Sitisans from the worst state of slavery. !! O Liberty how art thou fallen! Spirit of Seventy six Where hast thou flu! lord save our country from the scourge that we have so justly merited.

During the winter of 1835-1836, Turner preached to "sinners and backsliders" in Monroe and Orleans Counties, N.Y., before returning to New York city ("Of this city I can say if any man has the ordinary feelings of humanity his heart will be touched. Here are the most distressing scenes of poverty, misery and profanity! Thousands crowding their way to ruin through the chanel[sic] of intemperance [sic] and debauchery) and then home to Foxcroft.

By the fall 1837, however, Turner returned to western New York, itinerating through towns in Genesee, Orleans, and Monroe Counties, and in mid-December in Poultney, Vermont. Rejected by the church leaders there, Turner accepted an appointment with the Yates Quarterly Meeting Home Mission Society, working the Finger Lakes Region, southern Ohio, and then accepting an appointment the Freedom and Farmersville Church, in Cattaraugus County, New York.

Turner returned to Maine, preaching in Norridgework in 1843, and later in Penobscot, County, and he married his wife, Emely, presumably a second wife, in Glenburn, Maine, on Oct. 6, 1847.

Scope of collection

Written for his wife, Abel Turner's long and detailed autobiography is a remarkable record of a young Free Will Baptist minister's labors during the Second Great Awakening. Beginning with his childhood in Maine and his conversion experience, the manuscript provides insight into Turner's experiences preaching in the rough-hewn interior settlements of Maine and the Burned-Over

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The reverse side of the manuscript's title page states:

When I commenced writing I had not the least idea of any one ever seeing it except my Mother or some near friends. Since I were married I often resolved to burn what I had written but for the sake of my wife have consented to write it over for her, and if any compitent judges should think it worth publishing for the F. W. Baptist it may be, after my dicease. Freedom, 28 Dec. 1839 -- A. Turner.

The diary includes two inscriptions asking for it to be returned to Abel Turner, Sauk Co., Wisconsin, suggesting Turner relocated there at some point after his marriage in 1847. He does not appear to be same Abel Turner from Maine who was an early settler in York Township.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

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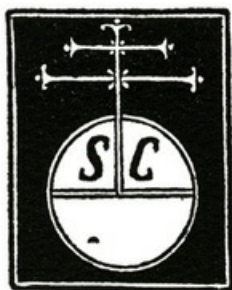
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