

The Reverend William Irvine **Vicky Ingram**

There's an epigram attributed to Voltaire that says that history is a trick played upon the dead by the living. In the case of poor Rev. William Irvine, the second minister of Cove Presbyterian Church from 1776 to 1800, the memory of man has been inconsiderate, to say the least.

In 1879 the editor of the Charlottesville Chronicle interviewed a member of Cove Presbyterian Church, Moses Maxwell, about the history of the church. At the time of the interview, Maxwell was 82 years old. He was described as still "enjoying fair health and all his faculties, and able to ride two miles on horseback to church and to the post office." He had been twelve years old when this brick building was built in 1809 upon land that his grandfather had donated.

Moses Maxwell seems to have remembered the third pastor of Cove, the Rev. James Robinson, very kindly. He characterized Robinson as "one of the most sincere, humble and devotedly pious men" that he had ever met. Maxwell seems not to have known Robinson's predecessor, the Rev. William Irvine, personally, but that did not prevent him from dropping this bombshell, which the editor recorded as follows:

"One Irvin, Mr. Maxwell says, preceded that revered and greatly esteemed man of God, Rev. James Robinson. He thinks that he did not preach long, there being charges of gross immorality preferred against him."

In fact, the Rev. Irvine (sometimes spelled "Irvin") preached at Cove Presbyterian Church for over twenty years. Nonetheless, there is some controversy and confusion surrounding his ministry at Cove. But nothing that I have seen so far in the historical record corroborates Mr. Maxwell's assertion.

Robert Emery, in his history of Hanover Presbytery, mentions Irvine in relation to Presbytery discipline but says nothing about personal misconduct. Rather, he suggests that Irvine's problems were theological and political. For example, in 1791 when the Presbytery displayed its displeasure with the Rev. Irvine, it only cited him by name for nonattendance. However, the Presbytery certainly implied criticism when it ordered two ministers to go into Albemarle County "to investigate rumored irregularities in the churches north of the James River."

This investigation into "rumored irregularities" in the churches probably reflects in part the conflict between Hanover Presbytery and Albemarle County Presbyterians over the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening.

Apparently no Albemarle County Presbyterian minister, including Irvine, approved of the revivals that swept through Virginia after 1787. The other members of Hanover Presbytery embraced the new revivalism, however, disturbed as they were by the defection of so many Presbyterians to the great camp meetings of the Methodists and the Baptists.

In fact, one William Hill complained in his autobiography that the Presbyterian ministers of Albemarle County kept revivals out of their churches. He charged that Albemarle ministers had become "during the war and ever since . . . zealous whigs and politicians. [They] absented themselves almost entirely from the meetings of Presbytery . . . and would speak contemptuously of the revival."

Perhaps this conflict over revivalism eventually soured Irvine's relationship with the Cove Presbyterians, and perhaps some kind of garbled version of this conflict was passed on to Moses Maxwell.

On the other hand, further research into Hanover Presbytery records might uncover more scandalous reasons for his departure from Cove Church.

In any event, we know that Rev. William Irvine served Cove Church from 1776 until 1797 or 1800, depending on which source you examine. This is not a bad record for a man with a feeble constitution. Irvine's health was so precarious, even as a young man, that when he gave his first sermon at the Cove around 1773 he had to deliver it sitting down in order to conserve his energy. We know that he lived until 1809 and perhaps even saw this church being built. We know that between 1775 and 1810, while the other churches in Hanover Presbytery suffered a 40% decline in membership, the congregation of Cove Church hung on, and even built for the future. Although history seems mixed in its evaluation of Irvine, his legacy seems solid enough.