

The Reverend James Robinson

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According to an article in the Watchman of the South, a predecessor to Presbyterian Outlook Rev. James Robinson was a native of Maryland. He was a grown man before he began his academic studies at Liberty Hall Academy, later Washington College and now Washington and Lee University. He must have been quite intelligent, since it was reported that he learned rapidly and graduated in a shorter time than was usual.

After his graduation, he became pastor of both Cove and Rockfish churches. The Watchman article says this happened in about the year 1798, although we're not sure about this date. It is certain that he was the pastor of Cove Church when this brick building was built.

From all accounts, James Robinson was an extremely devout man and an excellent preacher. The Chronicle article refers to him as "that revered and greatly esteemed man of God." Mr. Maxwell "remembered Mr. Robinson, and remarked that he was one of the most sincere, humble, and devotedly pious men he had any remembrance of." And a successor, Rev. B. M. Wailes, is quoted in the same article as saying of Robinson,

He was an able and eloquent preacher of the Gospel. In that day churches were few. We learn that when he preached at Rockfish many would come in from Rock Creek, in Augusta, Tye River in Nelson, and the Cove, in Albemarle, places ten or fifteen miles distant, to hear him.

According to the Watchman, James Robinson resigned from the Rockfish church in about 1813 because of "bodily infirmities," but continued at Cove until his death on December 1, 1819.

There are two events in the life and ministry of James Robinson that are of special interest. One is related in the first volume on the History of Cove Church, which I quote:

at the October term of the Circuit Court of 1818, James Robinson, pastor at the Cove, was presented to the Grand Jury for the unlawful assembling of slaves and teaching them at the Cove Meeting House, on the Sundays of September 22nd and October 4th. This presentment was based on the information of Henry T. Harris, Isaac Hays, Jr., William Suddarth and Samuel W. Martin. He was reported as having said to the slaves, 'You have been disappointed in your school, but do not be disheartened. Come and attend to me; I will instruct you, and I have no doubt that in fifteen or twenty years you will be as free as your master.'

Apparently his son, James Robinson, Jr., remembered in the Chronicle as "a tall, finely formed young man, fair skin, blue eyes, and of engaging manners. ...very popular, much and deservedly loved," got into trouble for defending his father, since according to the Cove History he was brought before the Judge for abusing Elijah Brown, one of the Grand Jurors in the case, and [was] fined \$100, though upon his poverty being proven it was reduced to \$50. This case was continued for two or three terms of the Court, then allowed quietly to drop.

No mention of Robinson having taught slaves is made in any other source that I was able to find, although there were several allusions to his having been a man of strong mind and strong feelings.

The other controversial incident involving Robinson was his death. In the first volume of the History of Cove Church, we read concerning Robinson,

In July 1820 Rev. James Robinson met with a tragic death. The road on the east side of Persimmon Mountain passed then, as it did up until a few years ago, along the bed of the South Hardware, about four miles north of Covesville. There the venerable minister was found lying in the stream, with life extinct. Whether he was smitten with an apoplectic stroke, or whether his horse took fright is not known. It is said he was accustomed to ride a spirited animal.

Interestingly enough, in the History of Albemarle County by Rev. Edgar Woods, which was published in 1901 (the last year recorded in the first volume of the History of Cove Church), we read the following account of the death of the Rev. John Todd:

Rev. John Todd met with a tragic death on his return from a meeting of Presbytery at the Cove. The road on the east side of Persimmon Mountain passed then, as it does still, along the bed of the South Hardware for a short distance; there the venerable minister was found, lying in the stream with life extinct. Whether he was smitten with an apoplectic stroke or whether his horse took fright, and starting suddenly threw him, was not known. It is said he was accustomed to ride a spirited horse.

The literary relationship of these two accounts is obvious, and since the Cove History updates the information about the road on the east side of Persimmon Mountain, it is most reasonable to suspect that it came later and was dependent on Woods. According to the Watchman, James Robinson was in fact killed by a fall from his horse, but it happened on December 1, 1819, and not in July of 1820.

He was survived by his widow, a daughter of the first pastor of Cove Church, Rev. Samuel Leake, and by his son, James Robinson, Jr. This son, whose attractiveness and promise are well attested, died very young of typhoid fever after having attended his fiancée, a Miss Montgomery, as she died of the same disease. Another daughter, Betsy Robinson, according to the Chronicle, was facially disfigured due to a fall in infancy. Apparently there were other daughters who married and moved west, taking their sister and mother with them.

The story of Rev. James Robinson illustrates well the difficulties of life in this part of Virginia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It also speaks volumes for the commitment and dedication of Christians in this area: despite physical illness and legal persecution, Robinson continued his ministerial labors until his death, and he was fondly remembered by his parishioners.