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JESSE COX (1793-1879)
DIARY,
1834-1865

Processed by:

Elbert L. Watson
Archival Technical Services

Accession Number: 789
Microfilm Accession Number: Mf. 86
Date Completed: December 3, 1962
Location: Manuscript Files Box M-24

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INTRODUCTION

The diary of the Reverend Jesse Cox, (1793-1879), a pioneer Williamson County, Tennessee, Primitive Baptist minister, was a gift from a descendent, Mrs. Lula Cox Phillips, Nashville, Tennessee. The materials in this finding aid measure .42 linear feet. Single photocopies of unpublished writings may be made for purposes of scholarly research.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jesse Cox

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| 1793, July 19 | Born in Sullivan County, Tennessee |
| 1803, October | Moved to Davidson County, Tennessee |
| 1812 | Served with Andrew Jackson for eighteen months in frontier warfare against Creek Indians |
| 1816, January 18 | Married Elizabeth Jane Brown; from this union were born seven children: Garner, William, Martha, Mary Jane, Elizabeth and Jesse, Jr. |
| 1820 | Settled four miles southeast of Franklin, Tennessee |
| 1821, March | Ordained Deacon at the Big Harpeth Baptist Church |
| 1834 | Ordained Elder; one year later he accepted pastorate of Big Harpeth Baptist Church. His ministry, although marked by considerable controversy, evidenced much accomplishment. He traveled extensively as a typical pioneer preacher, ministering to his parishioners and the spiritually needy. An author of some note, he published numerous religious articles and one book entitled <i>An Exposition of the Revelation</i> |
| 1861-1864 | He suffered many privations during the Civil War by Federal troops. Under compulsion of losing his property, he reluctantly took the loyalty oath on January 20, 1864 |
| 1880, August | Died at his home; buried in the Big Harpeth Baptist Church (now known as McConnico Baptist Church) cemetery |

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Jesse Cox diary, containing one volume of 520 pages, spans the period 1834-1865. The diary is an informative record of the life of an early pioneer Tennessee minister. Elder Jesse Cox, the diarist, was born in Sullivan County, Tennessee, July 19, 1793. Earlier, in 1791, his parents had migrated to the present Davidson County from Maryland, but had disparaged of that site because of continued Indian harassments. Formal education for Jesse was quite limited in scope, but he imbibed from his devout Baptist parents serious religious inclinations.

In October 1803, the Coxes returned to Davidson County, where the father died the following year leaving the wife to care for six children. The family survived under extremely difficult circumstances.

Cox fought in the three battles during the War of 1812, spending almost eighteen months in frontier warfare against the Creek Indians. Several brushes with death made upon him a profound impression concerning eternity, although he had not at this time actually embraced religion. On January 18, 1816, he married Elizabeth Brown and one year later he accepted the Primitive Baptist faith.

In 1820 the Coxes purchased a large piece of land four miles southeast of Franklin, Tennessee, settled down and raised seven (known) children: Garner, William, Martha, Mary, Elizabeth, Jane and Jesse, Jr.. Through personal industry and fortitude they earned sufficient wealth for rural people of that period. They owned a dozen or more slaves, usually produced prosperous crops and had a herd of cattle and horses. Two sons, Garner and William, completed medical school and maintained their own practices.

An active member of the Big Harpeth Baptist Church, Cox continued to have inward doubts about his religious experience. Eventually he became impressed that God was directing him toward the ministry, which he defined as a "divine impression made upon the mind so that the individual cannot rest unless he obeys". Accordingly, he devoted himself full-time to the ministry in 1834.

Thereafter, the journal reveals a fascinating story of a typical itinerant preacher in the early nineteenth century. One can trace his progress from the valleys to the mountaintops, then back into the valleys again. The fact that Cox possessed inner piety and personal dedication did not exempt him from numerous discouragements and reversals. These he frankly confessed along with the height moments of his ministry. His privations included being away from home weeks at a time "preaching and visiting the sick" (p. 47) At age fifty-nine, he traveled four miles through weather eight degrees below zero to perform a wedding. At times he spoke to only a handful of the faithful, while on other occasions his audience numbered as high as five thousand.

As was the case with many early ministers, controversy became a trademark with Cox. A staunch defender of the Primitive Baptist faith, he often found himself at odds with members of the Church of Christ, Cumberland Presbyterians, and Missionary Baptists. For some reason his journal does not indicate much personal involvement with Methodists, other than his speaking occasionally in their churches or cooperating in a

funeral service. Possibly his firm predestinarian beliefs were so contrary to the Arminian Methodists, that he felt their views would be impossible to reconcile. With the other three groups there was some overlapping in doctrine, making each susceptible to correcting what they saw as deficiencies in the sister denominations' practices. With the Church of Church the issue was baptism; with the Cumberland Presbyterians, infant baptism; and with the Missionary Baptists, church government. Ardently congregational, Cox regarded the Missionary Baptists of his day as too highly centralized because of their Associations. He also fought zealously against lawyers, doctors, and Freemasons and aroused considerable ire because of his contention with the latter group.

The Civil War period constitutes one of the most interesting eras in Cox's diary, although it came at a time when infirmity produced a marked effect upon his pen. As early as 1840, Cox took a pronounced stand for slavery after receiving a communication from the Anti-Slavery Society meeting in New York, and thereafter he viewed the approaching crisis with personal concern for Southern Rights. It is interesting to note that his sermons during this period dealt almost entirely with Biblical prophecies, his belief being that the North represented the Beast spoken of in Revelation, while the South was the Lamb, or Christ. Understandably, he was completely confident that the South would prevail.

Cox first referred to the war in an entry for May 18, 1861, when he told of seeing his son Jesse leave Franklin for service in the Confederate Army. Later he wrote of the "great excitement" in the area over the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson. When Federal troops entered Nashville, he inscribed "Will the Lord save us from such an unreasonable foe", and when they passed through Franklin he could only wonder at how "strange are the ways of providence".

The Cox diary is of special value for its graphic descriptions of inflictions and impositions directed at southerners by occupying troops. Cox found himself stripped of horses, cattle and forage. He thought his life to be in constant jeopardy and recounted one occasion when a soldier held a pistol close to his head. His confidence abounded when he heard glowing reports, often exaggerated, of Forrest's raids and Confederate victories from the Mississippi River to Virginia. Gradually, however, hope subsided as reports became more discouraging. "No tongue can describe the intense anxiety", he wrote April 13, 1863, and finally, on January 20, 1864, he found himself compelled to take the oath of allegiance or be driven off his property. He took the oath with extreme reluctance, praying that God would forgive him if he had done wrong. Possibly his greatest disappointment lay in the fact that during 1863 he preached only fourteen times, considerably less than his previous average of 150-175 times per year.

There is little recorded after 1864, Cox's palsy having reached the point that his writing was hardly legible. Although there are numerous grammatical and spelling errors, one is impressed with the fact that Cox was a unique, well-informed individual, quite abreast of his times. His diary, therefore, can be regarded as a valuable source for Tennessee cultural and religious history.