

The William Foy Story

By Mark Silk

Around 1867, according to George E. Street's 1905 history of Mount Desert, "a colored evangelist, Rev. William E. Foy, organized at Otter Creek a church of twenty-five members to be known as a 'Christian Church.'" That is the extent of what Street, a Congregational minister, has to say about perhaps the most consequential figure in American religious history ever to reside in Hancock County. But we should not be surprised. Foy had made his mark more than two decades before he appeared in Otter Creek, and his historical significance is even today recognized by very few.

William Ellis Foy was a native Mainer, born in the small town of Belgrade just north of Augusta in 1818.² In 1835, he experienced a religious conversion under the preaching of Silas Curtis, a Freewill Baptist minister. Freewill Baptists rejected the Calvinist view that people are predestined to be saved or damned, believing instead that all are capable of availing themselves of God's grace. In Maine, they were strongly opposed to slavery, and Curtis was among their leading advocates of emancipation.

By 1840, Foy was living in Boston with his wife Ann and their young daughter Amelia, having apparently decided to advance his education by studying for the Episcopal priesthood. At the time, many New Englanders were

consumed with the prophecies of William Miller, a farmer and lay Baptist preacher who predicted that Christ's return was imminent. The date was initially set for some time between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844, and then, after a series of recalculations, fixed on October 22, 1844.

Like a number of other antebellum Protestant groups, the Millerites condemned sectarian divisions in the name of restoring the Primitive Church. The movement drew from many denominations, and there was no shortage of opposition among the denominational clergy.

Foy was not initially a believer. But on January 18 and February 4, 1842, he collapsed during church services, lying inert for two and a half hours the first time and subsequently for twelve and a half hours. Both times, when he came to, he was able to relate detailed visions of the arrival of the saved in heaven. These visions persuaded him of the doctrine of Jesus' "near approach," and turned him into a celebrity preacher.³

In city after New England city, he appeared before thousands in the garb of an Episcopal priest, recounting his visions and preaching the Millerite gospel with eloquence and erudition. Critics did not scruple to employ racist language against him. "When will wonders cease?" asked the *Portland Tribune* in a story on February 10, 1844. "The Millerites of this city have recently imported a great bull nigger, who has been rolling up the white of his eyes, showing his ivory, and astonishing the good people by his dreams and prognostications."⁴

Foy had moved to Portland after receiving his visions, and among his eager auditors was a teenager

named Ellen Hammond, whose father took her to hear him in Beethoven Hall on Congress Street and on Cape Elizabeth. In due course, the young woman claimed to have her own visions, and was invited to speak about them. As she recalled many years later, "While I was talking I heard a shout, and he is a great, tall man, and the roof was rather low, and he jumped right up and down, and oh, he praised the Lord, praised the Lord. It was just what he had seen, just what he had seen." Afterwards, the two spoke with each other. "But they extolled him so I think it hurt him, and I do not know what became of him," she said. "He was a very tall man, slightly colored. But it was remarkable testimonies that he bore."⁵

Hammond's encounter with Foy took place in 1845, when the faithful that remained after Christ failed to return — "The Great Disappointment," as they called it — were seeking a way forward. In January, Foy had arranged with two Millerite brothers who ran a Portland printing house to bring out an autobiographical pamphlet titled *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy*. "My object in publishing these visions," he wrote, "is to comfort the saints."⁶ The leader of the saintly remnant would in due course be none other than Ellen Hammond, who in 1846 married a Millerite preacher named James White and, as Ellen White, went on to establish the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

White owed her prominence to her visions, which, like Foy's, provided the kind of empirical proof of divine authorization that many nineteenth-

century American Protestants sought. In places, her descriptions of what she experienced closely track what Foy described.⁷

Foy:

"The angel raised his right hand, and laid hold upon the gate, and opened it; and as it rolled upon its glittering hinges, he cried with a loud voice, to the heavenly host, 'You're all welcome.'"

"I then saw in the midst of the place an innumerable multitude, arrayed in white raiment, standing in a perfect square, having, crowns of unfading glory upon their heads."

White:

"Jesus raised His mighty, glorious arm, laid hold of the pearly gate, swung it back on its glittering hinges, and said to us, 'You have washed your robes in My blood, stood stiffly for My truth, enter in.'"

"Here on the sea of glass the 144,000 stood in a perfect square. Some of them had very bright crowns, others not so bright."

Adventists have regarded these and other textual parallels as evidence that Foy was a bona fide forerunner of White, a prophetic "herald and mouthpiece" of the earliest members of their community.⁸ To an outsider's eyes, however, it looks as though White took Foy's words and gave them a conventional Christian spin, for example by substituting Jesus for his angel and by replacing "innumerable" with 144,000 — the number of the saved specified in the Book of Revelation.

Unlike Foy, White was not very literate, and when she began to publish her visions in 1846, her better educated husband edited them for publication. In later life, she had a propensity to appropriate the writings of others.⁹ It is hard to avoid the conclusion that her published visions



Ellen G. White, ca. 1875. *Courtesy Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.*

were in part plagiarized from Foy. But beyond the question of plagiarism, Foy appears to have profoundly influenced her career as a religious leader. Would Ellen White even have had that career if she had not been inspired by his preaching?

Foy did not join White's church, and only recently, thanks to the biographical research of the African-American Adventist leader Delbert Baker, has he earned a place of honor in the twenty-million-member denomination. J.N. Loughborough, its first historian,

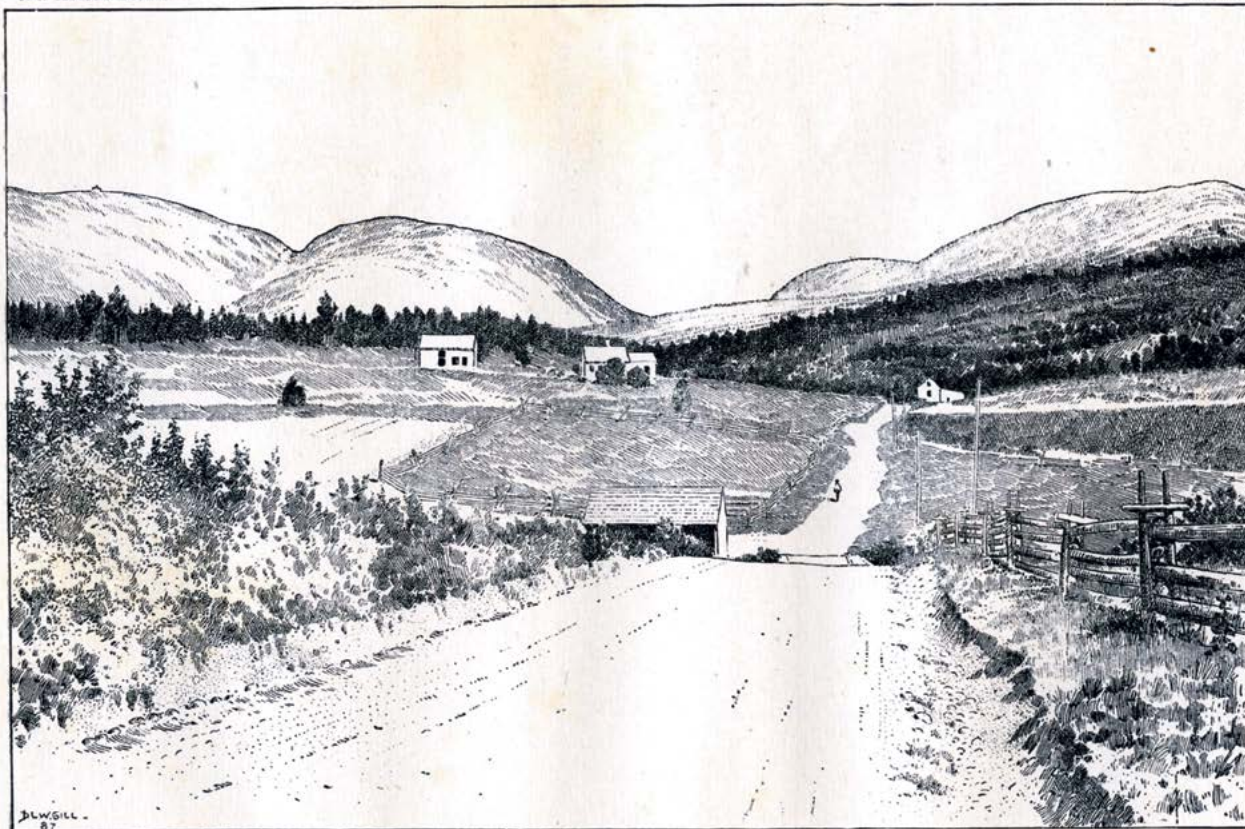
dismissed Foy as a failed prophet, writing, "He finally became exalted over the revelation, and thus lost his simplicity, hence the manifestation of this gift to him ceased, and soon after he sickened and died."¹⁰

But Foy didn't die. Public records indicate that he rejoined the Freewill Baptist fold, taking charge of a racially mixed congregation in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in the late 1840s. By 1855 he was back in Maine, serving as an itinerant Freewill Baptist pastor in Chelsea, Brunswick, and Burnham, where the 1860 Census shows him boarding with a young farmer named Riley Whitten.

Foy's wife Ann seems to have died before 1850, about which time his newly widowed mother Elizabeth, known as Betsy, came to live with him. In 1851, he married Caroline Griffin of Gardiner, who gave birth to two children, Orrin in 1852 and Lauraitta (also called Laura) in 1856, before she herself died. In 1863, Lauraitta died and perhaps not coincidentally, Foy left Burnham, living some miles to the east before arriving in Otter Creek.

George Street, who began vacationing on Mount Desert in the 1870s, had good sources for his sentence on the "colored evangelist." He got Foy's name right and placed him among the Island's Freewill Baptists. That the church Foy organized at Otter Creek was "known as a 'Christian Church'" points to the rejection of denominational divisions that he would have retained from his Millerite days. Finally, Street's dating of Foy's activity fits with what we know from other evidence of his whereabouts.

In 1868, Foy purchased a piece of property from William Johnson on what is now Route 183 near Little Tunk Pond in East Sullivan, in the section of land then called Plantation 7. The following year he bought a nearby parcel from Isaac Bunker. His mother Betsy died in 1870, and the 1870 Census identifies him as a preacher living on the property with his son Orrin, identified as a mariner. In 1873, he married a cook and housekeeper from



COVE CLAY, WITH FAINT ELEVATED SEA MARGINS, AT OTTER CREEK.

Nathan Shaler Lithograph of Otter Creek, ca. 1880. *Courtesy of the National Park Service, Acadia National Park*

the Portland area named Parcentia Rose, and two years later deeded the Plantation 7 property to her. To support his family, he seems to have done some farming. He also built a neighbor's house. The Bangor *Daily Whig and Courier* mentions his holding services in Augusta, Sidney, and on Hurricane Island in 1874, and conducting a funeral service on Court Street in 1875. By 1880, he had changed the spelling of his name to Foye.

In the late nineteenth century, the part of Hancock county where Foy lived was closely connected to Mount Desert. The railroad line that

brought visitors to the island terminated at Hancock Point, whence steam ferries made regular trips to Bar Harbor. The island's newspapers made it their business to report on what went on in Sullivan and environs.

Two decades after leaving Otter Creek, Foy himself retained a connection with Mount Desert. The following item was published in the *Mount Desert Herald* on April 16, 1886.

On Saturday last a horse attached to a buggy standing near the house of Mr. David Thomas, at Otter Creek, ran away and about destroyed the carriage. The horse belonged to Mr. Aulick Palmer, of Washington, D.C., and was in charge of Mr. Thomas Savage; the wagon belonged to the Rev. Wm. E. Foye. Mr. Savage paid for the wagon.

Who were these characters? Thomas, born in Presque Isle in 1826, was a churchman generally referred to as Deacon, as can be seen on his tombstone in the Otter Creek Cemetery. Savage was probably Thomas R. of Eden, born in 1852 and identified in the 1880 Census as a common laborer. Aulick Palmer was a well-to-do, well-connected Episcopalian from Washington, D.C. who served as president of the American Society of Civil Engineers and U.S. consul general in Dresden, Germany. In 1886, he began building a summer cottage in Otter Creek, a few houses away from Deacon Thomas.

It is tempting to speculate that Savage, perhaps employed at Palmer's construction site, had borrowed the horse for some kind of religious errand involving Thomas and Foy. But Foy needn't have had any personal involvement. The buggy/carriage/wagon was likely one of the many conveyances kept on lots in Bar Harbor for rental to those who needed to move goods or people around the island. The clergyman in East Sullivan would then have depended on the lot owner, presumably someone he knew, to assure him a small but regular income.

The lives of rusticators and locals in Gilded Age Hancock County were at

once entwined in daily life and separated by a vast socioeconomic gulf. On August 9, 1889, Aulick Palmer hosted a lavish banquet on his cottage grounds for President Benjamin Harrison and some 250 invited guests, including governors, senators, and various foreign dignitaries. "*FEASTING THE PRESIDENT*," reads the headline in the August 10 edition of the *New York Times*. "BAR HARBOR SOCIETY AGLOW." According to the story, the president's table (which was inside the house) was adorned with a two-foot-long seashell from Florida filled with water lilies and the room was decorated with begonias and orchids shipped in from Washington. "This is a prohibition state, but champagne flowed like water," the *Times* drily noted.

Two weeks earlier, a story in the *Bar Harbor Record* told of another outdoor affair that, despite the absence of champagne, seems to have been at least as effervescent.

PLANTATION No. 7. — Although this is but a small place we have plenty of company and very good times. The drive up here from Sullivan is very pleasant and attractive. A party from West Sullivan was here last week. In the party were Mr. and Mrs. Oakman Bunker and son Fred, Mrs. Nathan Bunker, Mrs. Helen Ramsdell and her daughter Ada, and Mrs. Hattie Gordon. They brought with them a beautiful large awning, which they raised in front of Mr. Wm Johnson's home and one day invited friends and had a picnic beneath it. Among the guests were Mr. and Mrs. Simon Havey, aged respectively eighty and eight-five years. Oakman Bunker, the jolly cook, well-known to sportsmen and rusticators, officiated and everything was prepared in fine style. Spring chicken, raspberries and cream, ice cream and lemonade and all the delicacies of the season were

served. Mrs. Gordon favored us with music from the organ and Elder Foye gave a short and appropriate address. It was a day that will long be remembered by young and old.

These visiting Bunkers (including Mrs. Ramsdell and daughter) were relatives of residents of Plantation 7, and clearly Foy had become one of the local fixtures.

In her genealogical history of Sullivan and Sorrento, published in 1953, Lelia A. Clark Johnson goes out of her way to pay tribute to him as a pillar of local religion. In a section titled "The Church," Johnson reprints a sketch of local church history written by O.G. Barnard, the Methodist pastor in Sullivan, as an appendix to a pamphlet marking the 1904 rededication of Sullivan's first meeting house.¹¹ Barnard discussed Baptists, Methodists, and "liberal Christians," but made no mention of Foy. Johnson remedies this with "East Sullivan Church," a short subsection of her own that begins:

Not to be forgotten among the preachers was Elder William E. Foye, who was esteemed and beloved. No one seems to remember just when he came, but neighbors have a very clear memory of a very dark complexioned, colored man, small in stature (sic) with white curly hair, wearing a tall silk hat and swallowtail coat, and holding meetings in the hall, and also different school houses.

Elsewhere in the volume Johnson writes, "Tradition has it that he was an escaped slave from New Jersey. He probably came here in the 1860s or 70s."¹²

Johnson was doubtless drawing on personal memories of Foy. She was born 1862 and grew up in the area, and her husband was a native of East Sullivan.¹³ Then (as now) there were very few African

Americans living in Hancock County, and Foy in his swallowtail coat and tall silk hat cannot but have cut a memorable figure. Under the circumstances, then, it is odd indeed that her physical description of him should be at such odds with the others we have. Was he short and very dark complexioned, as she says, or tall and light complexioned, as he was portrayed in the *Portland Tribune* and recalled by Ellen White?

Could there actually have been two William Foyes — the first a native Mainer who achieved celebrity during the Millerite enthusiasm and, as Loughborough believed, died shortly thereafter; the second an escaped slave who assumed Foy's identity, living the life of a freelance preacher from the late 1840s until his death in 1892?

New Bedford was a major stop on the Underground Railroad, an asylum for escaped slaves where Frederick Douglas arrived under an assumed name in 1838. The Freewill Baptist clergyman named William E. Foy who lived there in 1850 is listed on the Census form as "black" (not "mulatto" like his neighbors) and born in Massachusetts. It is not impossible that an African-American preacher escaping slavery was made pastor of a local mixed-race Freewill Baptist congregation under Foy's name, perhaps thanks to Silas Curtis, who in 1849 became president of the recently established Freewill Baptist Anti-Slavery Society.¹⁴

Not impossible, but nevertheless improbable. Foy the visionary would have been a well-known figure in southern Maine in the 1850s, when



View of vestibule window,
ca. 1904, artist unknown.
Otter Creek Hall

someone with his name was pastoring there, and Census records show a Betsy Foy (presumably Foy's mother) living with him in 1850 and 1860, and an Amelia (presumably his daughter) living with him in 1860. That these women would have associated themselves with an impostor is hard to believe.¹⁵

There is no photograph of Foy to shed light on this question, only one of a young, apparently light-skinned young black man believed to be Orrin Foy — who would have been the son of the second Foy. While DNA testing of known descendants might be able to provide an answer, for now it seems safest to conclude that all the evidence relating to William Ellis Foy has to do with one and the same person, and that the confusion derives from the vagaries of memory, racial prejudice, and/or a high degree of variability in white peoples' descriptions of African Americans.

Whatever the case, it's clear that the settled clergy in Sullivan wanted nothing to do with the Foy who lived among them, and perhaps vice versa. The hall where Johnson says he held his meetings was Temperance Hall, a gathering place in East Sullivan that was built in the 1870s by the local chapter of the Independent Order of Good Templars. Founded in upstate New York in the early 1850s, this progressive fraternal organization admitted men and women on an equal basis and made no distinction by race. Sullivan's Good Templars were just the people to welcome an African-American preacher.

As for Johnson's recollection of his also holding meetings "in different school buildings," a notice that "Reverend Mr. Foye of Sullivan" would be holding a "series of meetings at the Magadore school building" in Steuben appears in the *Bar Harbor Record* of November 19, 1891.

Foy died on November 9 of the following year, half a century after receiving his visions and inspiring Ellen White. His house was sold to a lumber dealer



The gravestone of William Foy at Birch Hill Cemetery in East Sullivan. Photo by the author

a year and a half later and his wife went to live with a family in the area, at the expense of the Town of Sullivan.¹⁶ He is buried in Birch Tree Cemetery, down the road from his home, among the neighbors who loved him, next to Parcentia and together with Laura, whose remains he evidently brought from Burnham.

His modest tombstone is there today, inscribed with the lines,

I have fought a good fight,
I have finished my course,
I have kept the faith;
Henceforth there is laid up
For me a crown of righteousness.

The words come from 2 Timothy, the last of the so-called pastoral letters attributed to St. Paul. No doubt, Foy himself picked them out. They suggest a proud man, an accomplished evangelist prepared to risk comparison with the Apostle, a Freewill Baptist confident he had done what was necessary to grasp the grace he believed his Lord had proffered to him.

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1. George Edward Street, *Mount Desert; a History*, ed., Samuel A. Eliot (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), 246.

2. The fullest account of Foy's life, together with a collection of the relevant documents, is Delbert W. Baker, *The Unknown Prophet; Revised and Updated* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013).

3. Quoted in Benjamin J. Baker, "'I Have Fought a Good Fight,' William Ellis Foy as a Millerite," *Dialogue* 25–3 (June 22, 2015): 18.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Delbert Baker, *The Unknown Prophet*, 185–86.

6. The pamphlet is reprinted in Delbert Baker, *The Unknown Prophet*: the quotation can be found on page 182.

7. For a close study of the parallels between Roy's and White's visions, see Tim Poirier, "Black Forerunner to Ellen White: William E. Foy," *Spectrum* 17, no. 54 (1987): 23–28.

8. Delbert Baker, *The Unknown Prophet*, 147.

9. Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, 3rd ed., (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI: 2008), 70, 289.

10. Delbert Baker, *The Unknown Prophet*, 190.

11. O.G. Barnard, "Local Church History," in *A Sermon* (West Sullivan, ME: Gerrish, 1905).

12. Lelia A. Clark Johnson, *Sullivan and Sorrento Since 1760* (Ellsworth, ME: Hancock County Publishing Company, 1953), 65, 37.

13. *Ibid.*, 273.

14. We know of at least one black minister who escaped slavery and became pastor of a Freewill Baptist congregation. Shortly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, the denomination considered how to respond to the law at its triennial General Conference in Providence, Rhode Island. As described by the Society's corresponding secretary, "The subject was introduced by one of our brethren, a minister of Him who was sent 'to preach deliverance to the captives.' [Luke 4:18] He asked advice, for he was himself a fugitive, liable every hour to be torn from his home, his family, and the flock of his charge. Sympathy for this distressed fugitive swelled every bosom." I.D. Stewart, *Fifth Annual Report of the Free-Will Baptist Anti-Slavery Society* (Dover: William Burr, 1851), 25.

15. But again, not impossible. In the famous Martin Guerre case from the 16th century, an honorable peasant woman named Bertrande de Rols accepted another man as her husband for years until the actual husband returned to claim his rights.

16. A notice in the September 5, 1894 issue of the *Bar Harbor Record* reads, "To whom it may concern, this is to notify and warn all persons from boarding or trusting Mrs. Preciuta (sic) W. Foy, of Plantation No 7, as we provide a boarding [place], and shall pay no bills of her contracting." It is signed "E.F. Chapham, A.T. Hill, Overseers of Poor, Town of Sullivan."



Detail of "Christ the Fisher of
Mankind," 1966, Susan Dunlap, USA.
St. Saviour's Episcopal Church, Bar Harbor