Bellefonte Methodism: 
Behind the Scenes

Once a Methodist preacher is reassigned and leaves an appointment, he is 
expected to disassociate himself from the affairs of that charge. But personal 
friendships are another matter – they neither begin nor end according to episcopal 
decree. So it is today, and so it was in 1854. During his service on the Bellefonte 
circuit 1847-49, Rev. Thompson Mitchell developed a friendship with local 
preacher John Tonner that was to endure across the decades.

Being a local preacher, Tonner was familiar with the politics and the pres-
resses of the ministry. And being the recorder of Centre County, he was familiar 
with the people of the area and their business. In short, Tonner could see things 
from both sides of the pulpit. What better person could there be to keep a former 
pastor up-to-date on all the happenings? And that’s just what occurred in this 
November 1854 letter from John Tonner to Thompson Mitchell.

The letter reveals nineteenth century practices, both church and non-
church – holding annual winter revival meetings, using the local newspaper to 
express ideas, etc., etc. The most revealing items, however, have to do with 
arrival of presiding elder John Poisal and his family. Despite the picture pre-
sented by the comedy of errors and the resulting ill will on both sides that 
occurred in Bellefonte, the Poisals proved to be effective in the ministry – and 
large revivals often occurred on the charges he served.

The original letter was donated to the conference archives in April 2001 
by Nancy Miller of Easton MD. The great-great-granddaughter of Rev. Thomp-
son Mitchell, she is in the process of sorting through correspondence that her 
family has preserved for generations. Most of the material represents personal 
exchanges between family members. She has generously agreed to pass along to 
the archives this letter, and any others she discovers that are of no direct value to 
the family but that might be of significance to Methodism.

Bellefonte
November 10, 1854

My Dear Beloved Brother

As I returned from tea this evening I found on my desk sundry letters and 
papers that had just been brought from the post office. Looking over the several 
endorsements, I discovered one postmarked Baltimore. I deferred opening it until 
I had read the rest, meanwhile wondering whose writing it was and knowing that 
my last letters from that region, as is too often the case, remained unanswered. 
When through with the other letters, I opened it. The first page, entirely filled in a
hand not seen for so long a time that I had entirely forgotten it, presented itself. I hastily turned the leaf, and O my astonishment when I saw the signature! I believe that nothing but a cry of fire or the groans of the suffering and dying would have prevented me from reading it at once. Well I did so.

I immediately read it and in compliance with its mandate, without rising from my seat, commenced this effort at a reply. And even now, surprise and delight, reminiscences of the past embracing the entire period of our interesting acquaintance are careening through my thoughts – with such haste and confusion that I despair of writing a letter that would not do discredit to a mind of much smaller pretensions than mine. I shall nevertheless have this consolation that if it does injustice to my head, I know that you will do justice to my heart.

Well now, after a lapse of so many years, with all their varied incidents, griefs and blessings, where shall I begin the task of connecting the past with the present. Need I do it? Shall I recount the events that have marked my chequered pilgrimage, deploring my unfaithfulness, and magnifying the deliverances a merciful God has wrought out for me? Oh, no! I need not. It is enough to say that I am nothing, and God has been and is still everything.

O! How often I have thought of you, particularly in connection with your Staunton station. How have your friends sympathized with your reported trials while there. But now you are more pleasantly situated, and I hope God will so bless your ministries to the people of your charge that you may have during the winter months a precious revival of religion. I know how such a state of things would fill your eyes with tears, and your heart with joy. May God grant it.

And now for local items. You know that our people have here erected one of the prettiest churches in all this region of country – I have not seen any out of the city that I prefer before it. I wish you could see it. Last year was our first as a station, with A. Myers for our preacher and Bro. Monroe for our P.E. Bro. Myers was just the man for the first year of a small station. He was an industrious pastor, gentlemanly and dignified in all his intercourse with the people, exceedingly zealous – almost, in the estimation of some, too much so. A warm and pathetic preacher with an extra allowance of the most biting sarcasm, precise in everything he had charge of, reproving with authority all departures from good breeding every where – particularly in the church – and directing with mildness but firmness all the services at the altar. In a word he has left his mark among us. It will be a long time before his stay in this place will have been forgotten. The fervour of his piety and his devotion to the spiritual interests of the people of his charge were not only praise worthy, but worthy of emulation by many in these regions who are too ready to detract from his reputation. As for our dear Bro. Monroe having already named him, I must be permitted even in a private letter, to advert to him. We as a people owe him a debt of gratitude for what he did for us. He managed our affairs in and out of council in such a manner as entitles him to our lasting gratitude. The Lord bless the dear old man abundantly. We all love him.
This year we have as you know, no doubt, one of the dearest little men in Dr. Daugherty we ever saw. In many respects the very opposite of Bro. Myers, but none the less useful, and none the less beloved. Universally popular, neat and perspicuous in his style as a preacher – and in his deportment harmless as a child. You know him – to you I need not eulogize him, only to say a “leetle” further that he is the man for us. At least the people say so – and I agree with them. We have not yet had our protracted meeting – it will commence in one week from tomorrow. We are looking for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit – and praying for a revival of religion. If it would please the Lord to favor us with such a season as we had when you were with us, wouldn’t I tell you every thing about it? “Well I would” – This is Saturday night, and it is growing late. I must close up until Monday morning. So that far away, I wish you Good Night.

(Monday Morning)

Good morning to you. I hope you had a pleasant time yesterday preaching the gospel to “sinners of mankind.” I did not preach anywhere – I heard the Doctor twice. And making a little allowance for sluggishness resulting from very early rising this morning, I feel very well – and all the rest are well.

I understood you were very near to being our Presiding Elder at the last conference. I think I had heard pretty much all about it, but yesterday the Dr. and I had it all over again – and he told some things I had not before heard. I wish in my heart you had been appointed – I have been grieved to learn that you would have been, but for the interference of Bro. Poisal. O, I do hope that he did not seek it – that he did not supplant you, and yet some of his brethren insist that he did. Well, he came among us and being entirely new in this section of country – a popular preacher and withal possessing very popular manners – with these natural accomplishments he made a fine impression wherever he went. Times and things have altered very much within the last 30 years. Then a Presiding Elder was regarded as head and shoulders above every other man – now it is as much as he can do, generally speaking, to maintain a respectable position among his brethren. Then every body went to hear the great gun, the P.E. – now some people don’t care whether he comes or not. Then the office elevated and sustained the man – now the man must elevate and sustain the office, or he and the office sink together.

He went from point to point doing his best, as he ought to do, and by the time he got round his district you would have thought a new era had dawned upon these regions. Every body seemed carried away with Bro. Poisal – even the several county papers of the district noticed his sermons in a very flattering manner. No marvel then that Mrs. P.E. should feel grateful enough to inform the Baltimoreans and Virginians that there were such places as “Warrior’s Mark,” “Youngwomanstown,” etc.

They intended making this place their residence, but no convenient house could be had. We then obtained board for them at Miss Cogan’s – fine rooms, accommodations, etc. We then left to bring Mrs. Poisal and family in about three
weeks – during which time a scandalous rumor was put in circulation about Mr. Reynolds\textsuperscript{10}, the proprietor of Miss Cogan’s house. It so incensed the public that in their indignation they declared that our P.E. should not board in any such place. I wrote to him in Baltimore, giving him an account of what had transpired in his absence – but unfortunately he did not get the letter. The whole burden of getting another boarding house for him in his absence devolved upon me. Mrs. Benner\textsuperscript{11} out of respect to me strained a point and agreed to take them, as she kept a boarding house. The day of their expected arrival at last came. The stage came into town – and in consequence of not having received my letter as before stated, they drove over to Miss Cogan’s.

I dispatched a messenger to inform them that we were under the necessity of making other arrangements – and that until Mrs. Benner could be ready to receive them, they should go to my house. Here they came stock, lock and barrel – just see the inventory: Mr. Poisal, Mrs. Poisal, John Poisal Jr., Emory Poisal, one tremendously large mastiff or Newfoundland dog, one small black dog, 4 pigeons and cage, 4 canaries and cage, six large trunks, sundry traveling bags and band boxes, Wilbur Watkins and baggage. You would have smiled had you seen the arrival. They remained until Mrs. Benner’s house was ready, nearly a week, on the very best I could afford – one of the specimens of Pennsylvania hospitality. They had been but a short time at Mrs. Benner’s until there was a difficulty about the bread, etc. – which resulted in a complete rupture. Yet while there the ladies of the place paid them great respect – almost every lady in the town of character called upon Mrs. Poisal. There being no other place left for them, they went to Miss Cogan’s – the first house agreed upon. They went there informed that at that house no attentions or visits would be paid them by the females in and out of the church – yet they went.

Then the indignation of Mrs. Benner and her large circle of friends gathered into a storm against Poisal and wife, the church, and my family. I had to endure rather more than my portion, because as Mrs. Benner said she never would have had the difficulty but for a disposition to accommodate me. And I, she suspected, was siding with Poisals because I would not join in the abuse of them – which I could not do under the circumstances. Well, at Miss Cogan’s they remained for some weeks, none of the ladies calling upon them, coming and going as best suited their convenience – until the day after the Bellefonte circuit Camp Meeting. Some person came into the store, and said “Poisals have gone.”

“Gone where?”
“O! Left for good”.
“Left for good? Why, what’s the matter?”
“O! They had another quarrel”.
“Not another quarrel? What about?”
“About John.”

Thus they left the town, without notice to a single member of the church. We thought hard of it – we had the vanity to think that we deserved better
treatment. Since then they are boarding at Potters Mills, but will have to leave there in a few days – for Huntingdon, a place they do not like.

After all this the letter of “traveler” made its appearance – what an unfortunate thing that it was ever written. She got into the buggy at Miss Cogan’s, went to Warrior’s Mark, returned through Bellefonte to Bellefonte Camp Meeting, from thence to Youngwomanstown, etc. – and not one word about the town except an incidental allusion to the Spring! When the letter was read here – in addition to its other objectionable features – the impression prevailed generally that she intended to slight Bellefonte. This brought out an article in one of the town papers over the signature of “Plebeian” that incensed them most tremendously. I ought to have stated that since they ceased boarding in town, my house has been their home – with the very best attentions we could give them. Since the appearance of the “Plebeian” article, Bro. Poisal has been at my house. It was in my house that he read the article. He indulged in very severe strictures on the morbid sensitiveness that would give place to such a construction of his wife’s letter. I had to defend – and as soon as he found that I was disposed to think as others do, there was a most sudden change in the expression of his countenance and the tone of his voice. I insisted that – unacquainted with the motives of the writer – a fair inference from the reading of the article would be that she purposely intended to slight Bellefonte. We compacted that affair with the understanding that a subsequent article shall do justice to Bellefonte.

Rather humiliating is it not? Indeed I am ashamed of it. I cannot see how under the circumstances she can say one word about it. Now you have a history that I never put to paper before – and shall not again. I have only to say now that you need have no fears of our being puffed up, getting consequential, and thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. We have always had friends enough scattered here and yonder to see that justice is done us. Among whom we claim yourself – to whom we shall be always willing to commit the safety of our reputation.

On the subject of the “Baby’s” age. I have made every effort to fix the time, but have no record of my visit, nor can I fix upon a single incident that will enable me to fix it. I know of no memory but a reference to the accoucher. He may have a minute if it – he ought to have.

We have two papers published in our town “The Democratic Whig” edited and published by J.K. Shoemaker and “The Centre Democrat” edited by W.W. Brown – who is a lawyer and a member of our church. If I understand the design of your inquiries, go ahead. Let us have the pleasure of reading something from your pen.

I have now obeyed your mandate by writing a longer letter than I have written for ten years. It is a motley mix of disjointed sentences, badly constructed. I have been under the necessity of writing in the store – people talking all the while, and sometimes required to join, as well as keeping open ears to the sayings of my clerks in the way of business. Under the circumstances I should not have undertaken to write to any other than a personal friend. To any
one else I would have transcribed and corrected it – but it is too long, nor can I
find time so to do. It is for the eye of my friends Thompson and Temperance 14
and no one else. I therefore cheerfully submit it to your charitable consideration.

May I indulge the hope of soon hearing from you again? Such favors will
always be welcome.

My family joins me in sending most cordial salutations of love to you,
sister Mitchell, and family – and I close with renewed assurance of the kindest
regards and brotherly affection of

Truly Yours,
John Tonner 15

End Notes

1 Rev. Thompson Mitchell (1817-1897) had served Bellefonte circuit 1847-49. He later
served as President of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary 1860-70 and as presiding elder
of four different districts: Northumberland 1856-60, Harrisburg 1870-74, Williamsport
1874-77, Juniata 1877-81. A four-time delegate to General Conference, he was born near
Newton Hamilton and is buried in Wildwood Cemetery, Williamsport. His last words
were reported to be “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy
name!”

2 Central Pennsylvania Conference was formed from Baltimore Conference (via the
short-lived East Baltimore Conference) in 1869. In the 1850’s the mother conference
stretched from Williamsport PA to Staunton VA, and Thompson Mitchell experienced
both extremes. Although assigned to Baltimore’s Columbia Street Church at the time of
this letter, his two previous appointments had been Williamsport 1851-53 and Staunton
1853-54.

3 This 1853 “prettiest” church was a frame structure, erected at the site of the original
1822 stone building it replaced. The dedicatory sermon was given by Bishop Edmund S.
James – accompanied by Rev. Henry Slicer of Baltimore, whose job it was to solicit from
those gathered for the occasion the money yet needed to pay for the building. The bishop
and his associate were brought across the mountains from Lewistown in carriages, and on
the return trip the Bishop preached a powerful sermon at Sprucetown – the original home
church of John Tonner, the author of the letter. This building at the northeast corner of
High and Penn Street was used until the present 1876 structure was dedicated at the site
of the station’s first parsonage. The High Street property was sold in 1881 and, with a
brick front, continues to be used as an apartment house.

4 Rev. Andrew J. Myers appears to be a ministerial son of the Fincastle circuit, York
County. After serving as Bellefonte’s first station pastor 1853-54, he was assigned to
Summerfield, near Baltimore, in which area he spent his remaining years. He located
(i.e., became a local preacher not available for regular assignment) in 1878 and died in
1896. He is buried in Greenmount Cemetery, Baltimore.

5 Rev. Thomas H.W. Monroe (1804-1864), a native of Fairfax County VA, was presiding
elder (district superintendent) of Huntingdon District 1850-54. His obituary states that
“he kept a full journal of his life, and has left several manuscript volumes both in prose
and verse, the whole furnishing materials, it is believed, if judiciously compiled, to form a valuable publication.” Those materials are in the archives of the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

6 Rev. Thomas Daugherty (1828-1885) served Bellefonte 1854-57, at which time he was assigned to Emory Chapel in Carlisle. He became a Christian at age 10, completed the ministerial course of study as a youth, and graduated from the Maryland University School of Medicine. He then taught anatomy at Washington College and was a practicing physician. In 1850, he answered the call of God and left a successful and promising career caring for bodies to care for souls. He practiced medicine throughout his life, chiefly among the poor of his congregations. He took no fees for his medical services, as he thought that would be unbecoming a minister of Christ. At the time of his death he was also a professor of physiology at the Baltimore Medical College.

7 Rev. John Poisal (1807-1882) served several prominent churches in the Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia conferences. In 1854 he became the first presiding elder of the newly-formed Bellefonte district. While the newness of this position created much of the difficulty and confusion described in the letter, this and other accounts indicate that Poisal was a strong personality. In 1877, he served briefly as chaplain of the US House of Representatives.

8 Mrs. John Poisal was the former Miss Ann Marie Wood. They were married in 1831. When John died in 1882, he was survived by only his wife and his son Thomas B. Poisal. John Poisal Jr, a member of the 4th Maryland Light Artillery Battery, died in a hospital during the Civil War. The fate of the other son (Emory) they had when they arrived in Bellefonte is unknown. Nor is it known whether they had other children.

9 Youngmanstown, Clinton County, is on the Susquehanna River. Later known as North Point, it is now recognized as North Bend. This is not to be confused with Youngmanstown in Union County, laid out by Elias Youngman in 1782 and incorporated in 1822 as the borough of Mifflinburg.

10 This is likely W. Fred Reynolds who at one time owned and operated a hotel next to the Episcopal Church, approximately where the Garman Theater now stands. He was the father of the Reynolds who built the Victorian mansion at Allegheny and Linn in which the Grace United Brethren congregation met from 1945 (when their church building at Thomas and High was destroyed by fire) until 1965 (when they united with the former Trinity Evangelical congregation to form the present Faith United Methodist Church).

11 Ann Elizabeth (Harvey) Benner (1802-1881) was daughter of Nathan Harvey and widow of Josiah Matlack Benner (1801-1848). Her father-in-law was General Philip Benner (1762-1832), for whom Benner township was named. The boarding house was on the southwest corner of Allegheny and High, next to the present Brockerhoff Hotel.

12 John Kidd Shoemaker (1812-1879) established The Democratic Whig in Bellefonte in 1840.

13 William W. Brown and M.P. Croswaithe assumed control of The Centre Democrat November 1, 1854, and it became the organ of the Know-Nothing party. The paper was established in Bellefonte in 1827 by General Philip Benner.

14 Miss Temperance Turner (1818-1900) and Thompson Mitchell were married in 1842. The daughter of Samuel and Katherine Kaufman Turner, she was born in Nescopek.

15 John Tonner (1818-1874) was a prominent Methodist layman first in Millheim, and later in Bellefonte. He was also a local preacher and served as register and recorder of Centre County 1839-51.