11 MINUTE READ

Joshua Thomas, The Parson of the Islands

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by Louis C. Wainwright in 1941

Transcribed, edited and with notes by James Dawson from an old manuscript he found

As late as the 1860s or ’70s, Deal’s Island, Maryland, was a camp meeting ground. Near the Methodist church was a “comely grove of pines, which alack-a-day, some artist had caused to be removed. A short distance beyond was another grove through which the island highway passed. This also some enterprising landscape artist has caused to be removed—I say artist, for I cannot conceive of a man with average aesthetic taste perpetrating such an enormity.”

The trees in the grove were beautiful, smooth-barked, straight as a mast, and immensely relieved the monotone of the flatness.

Doubtless in “The I’lent’s” palmy days these groves were larger and very attractive.

The region is a Methodist region, and in those days camp meetings were religious gatherings and were very popular.

Baltimore sent excursions, the county town emptied its stables to supply conveyances (for those were horse and buggy days).

The neighboring islands sent their contingents. They come from Tangier, Smith’s Island, Holland Island and even from Virginia.

The crowds went for various reasons; some for the stimulation of religious interest; some to promenade or to “meet the folk,” some for the general exhilaration socially, and some for sea food and the pleasure of the shore.

Primarily, the camp meetings were instituted to reach larger audiences with the Gospel message, and to stimulate Christian fellowship and spiritual profit, and were very successful in these things in early days, before there were so many diversions and monetary interests or social sports.

In those days the people were not so sophisticated, perhaps, but were wholesome.

Among the religious leaders not only of the I’lent but of the whole coastal region from the Wicomico to the southernmost island of the sound, the most eminent and devoted was the notable old preacher, Joshua Thomas, locally called “Joshwy.” His tomb is near the entrance of the Methodist church; his work had lasting qualities; his parish included the islands which separate Tangier sound from the bay, proper, to gather with the locals of the sound. He was notable for singleness of heart, and unfaltering faith. Fifty years ago, his imprint was still visible on the I’lent people. He was practically an itinerant, and his canoe was known in all the places along Tangier sound. At the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia, 1876, his old canoe, the “Methodist,” was exhibited and a pamphlet telling of his life and work were issued. He was honest and frank and unaffected. Any high school pupil knows more of history, belles lettres, or the theories and assumptions of science than he, but few on the hustings or in legislative halls equaled him in powerful oratory; few any where equaled him in faith or the native discernment. He was “unsophisticated” but he was a Christian, a man of faith and power. The British knew him, heard him, and though, at first they ridiculed his warnings, they became convinced that he was a prophet, as did many of the people.

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It would interest the reader to have presented here the incidents of his honest old man’s life, but space forbids, yet in all justice I should tell of his faith, his simple hearted converse with the Lord, and of his warnings to the British, whose ships rode off against Tangier where the old man often preached.

The following incident will indi- cate his simple implicit faith in whatever he found the Scriptures said.

He was due to speak at Tangier, but before Sunday rolled around, he was smitten down with a violent attack of rheumatism so that he could not walk.

The time grew near for going to Tangier Island, and he was unable to walk. He promptly sent for his Christian friends, explained to them that passage in James and said, “Brethren, pray for my healing that I may be able to preach Sunday and do as St. James said; anoint me with oil.

“I have not the special oil, but there is some goose fat. The prayer of faith will heal the sick.”

They did so and before they were done anointing him, he leaped from the bed exclaiming, “Praise the Lord, he has healed me.” He went to Tangier.

The following incident will amuse but there was nothing but simple hearted communion in it, as Joshwy saw it.

His wife died. He felt the loss in many ways but especially in the hampering of his work.

He had children who needed adult care, and he could not go forth to preach, and leave them.

He prayed and waited long. One day one of the Christians came to him and having set forth “Joshwy’s” need, advised him to marry and in the congregation intimated a nearby spinster. Joshua praised the Lord for the advice given, and promised the friend to think it over, so he did. He took it to the Lord, asking Him to guide him in the selection of a wife

Joshua Thomas

While he prayed the spinster’s image loomed up before him. “O no, Lord,” he cried, “not her; she’s too ugly.”

Again he prayed, and again the spinster’s eyes looked upon him; again he put it aside.

A third time he prayed; and a third time the spinster’s face rose to view. Joshua convinced this was the Lord’s answer, cried out, “Thy will be done; I don’t care if she is as ugly as a mud fence, I will marry her,” and he did, to his comfort and well being.

Of course, I tell these incidents as mother told them to me sixty years (perhaps) ago.

Anyone interested in the history of colonial days and the religious labors and the loyal patriotism of the coastal region of Tangier will find great pleasure in the notable career of Parson “Joshwy” Thomas; and if he enters into it with discriminating apprehension, no doubt a shade of subtle beauty and charm will settle on the waves and marsh grasses, and the I’lent will seem to expand before his eyes, and to take on unexpected importance.

Joshua Thomas was more nearly like an itinerant apostle, than a circuit rider.

As related, his parish extended the length of Tangier sound (islands and shores) to Tangier Island, which was visited by President Wilson, and, so to speak, was rediscovered, so long had interest in it lapsed; but in 1812 it needed no discoverer. The British anchored near it and Joshua Thomas made his voice heard in British camp or squadron and up and down the colonial shores. They were anxious days, thrilling days and noble days.

The British were truculent and as their ships rode at anchor or ascended the bay they often fired upon the villages in sheer spite.

I have seen chain shot at Holland’s Island which were fired by the British in 1812–14.

Joshua had no gun, but in those days he fired the hearts of his countrymen, and in the imagination of his words, lent tons of munitions to the struggling clusters of patriots. He

was more than a powder magazine to the colonists on the shores.

He preached fearlessly to the British soldiers warning them to repent as sinners before God, and also of the futility of their threat to take Baltimore. The soldiers liked him but regarded him as a visionary though honest man. At last the time came to attack Baltimore camp. New troops were assembling and anchoring over against Tangier Island. Parson Joshua was there. The night before all sailed for Baltimore the troops heard the old preacher deliver a special sermon. When he arose it seemed a prophet had arisen.

He reminded every man of his need to repent and be converted. That now was the accepted time, that many would be gone on the morrow, for war was no partial destroyer.

He admonished them of the special iniquity of this war, and that they were seeking to destroy a free people, which was a great evil.

He warned that the people of the Western world were not a helpless infant nation. Few indeed were their ships and guns, but God was their defense and strength, and that the prayers of the Godly were a-wing, and ascending to the throne of the Righteous and Holy One.

His people were a praying people, he cried.

The old man looked majestic with blazing eyes, and lifting his right hand heavenward, he shouted in the assurance of faith, “Return and do not harass a free people; return, for your cause is not just; return, for God is in his heaven and hears our prayer. Return, return, O you deluded souls! Yo’ c’yant take Baltimoah.”

“Or will you go up to battle? Go up then to slaughter; go up to defeat; Go up to failure, Go up to wounds and death, God hears our prayers and will content us and deliver.

Yo’ c’yant take Baltimoah.”

Such was the strain of the old man’s discourse that impressive hour.

The ships sailed away confident and proud.

The men had been impressed, but liked not to retain the old man’s warning.

Many a jest was born to camouflage that impression. Often there was loud laughter on board and one would imitate and cry, “No men, yo’ c’yant take Baltimoah. Yo’ c’yant!”

British regulars before raw pioneers—“yo ’c’yant! It’s a joke. Ha, ha, ha!”

The strife was not long. A man who has been knocked down is not long in falling.

So it was not long till white wings of men of war flapped over Tangier’s waters.

The British were back, balked and defeated. They did not, they could not take Baltimore.

They hailed the old parson as a prophet. They had heard him and his words come to pass.

“Surely,” said they, “he is no visionary; in all truth, he is a prophet, a mighty prophet.”

Joshua Thomas the Communities of the Delmarva Peninsula by Adam Wallace was published in 1861. As the dedication states, “All in every place who knew and loved this somewhat eccentric but singularly excellent Servant of God and who were pleased and profited by his long and successful ministry...”

As a prophet he passed among them; they wished to take him back to England with them, for verily he was a prophet.

Afterword by J.D.:

The biography Parson of the Islands: A Biography of the Rev. Joshua Thomas Embracing Sketches of His Contemporaries and Remarkable Camp Meetings, Revival Incidents, and Reminiscences of the Introduction of Methodism on the Islands of the Chesapeake and

There is some confusion as to what his title should be. Joshua Thomas was ordained as an Elder at the Philadelphia Annual Conference in 1835. Although he is known far and wide as the “Parson of the Islands,” his biography mostly calls him Brother Thomas. However, the title page and frontispiece of the book call him Reverend Thomas, and it is Reverend on his tombstone.

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Of course, he could have all of those titles in succession.

Brother, Parson, Elder or Reverend Tomas was born in Potato Neck in

Somerset County, Maryland, on Aug. 30, 1776. Before Thomas, the islands and shores of the lower Chesapeake Bay were rough and rowdy places with names like Devil's Island and Damned Quarter. After Thomas brought religion to the area, aided by his sailing to the islands in his log canoe "The Methodist," those places became Deal's Island and Dames Quarter.

The British attack on Baltimore on Sept. 12–15, 1814, ended in failure and helped to end the War of 1812, just as Thomas had prophesied. Wainwright calls him an old man, but actually he was only 38 when he preached to the British. His ministry ended at 2 o'clock on Oct. 8, 1853, aged 77 years, 1 month and 18 days. He is buried in the churchyard of St. John's M.E. Church and Joshua Thomas Chapel on Deal's Island. The chapel is the smaller building to the rear of the church, and Thomas's grave is by the front entrance.

Thomas's biography, first published in 1861, is still in print. The anecdote that Wainwright heard from his mother about how Thomas married his second wife is not in the official biography. And his exhortation to the British on the eve of their attack on Baltimore on pages 146 and 147 is given differently. Thomas is quoted in his biography as saying, "I told them it was given me from the Almighty that they could not take Baltimore, and would not succeed in their expedition…You cannot take it! " So the reader is left to wonder if Wallace's version was put into a more formal and refined literary form for the book, or if Wainwright's more lively account of "Yo' c'yant take Baltimoah!" exaggerated things somewhat. Also, the official biography does not contain Wainwright's account of some of the Brits mocking Thomas, though that could very well have happened.

Wainwright's mother, Olivia, was born in 1824, and while she was not old enough to have witnessed his sermon to the British in 1814, she certainly heard about it from people who did and also certainly saw him in person.

Since Brother Thomas, for all his abilities, was not an educated man, I suspect Wainwright's version may be the more accurate.

His log canoe "The Methodist" was either 16 or 27 feet long, depending on the account, and was said to have been hewn from one large pine tree by

Hance Croswell of Annamessex in 1806. After the parson's death, it was in the possession of Thomas's grandson and exhibited at the Philadelphia Inter- national Centennial Exhibition, the first official World's Fair, in 1876. After the grandson's death, it was sold to a Capt. Crockett of Norfolk and exhibited at the Jamestown Exposition in 1907, but it has since been lost to history and its present whereabouts are unknown. The sails were later owned by Norman Beloate of Accomack County, Virginia, who displayed them on Deals Island in 1937.

President and Mrs. Wilson visited Tangier Island in 1916 when sailing by on the presidential yacht and strolled down the main street.

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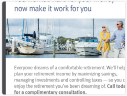

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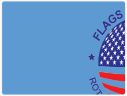

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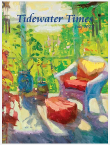

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