

Richmond Nolley: Louisiana's First Methodist Martyr

It is 1806 in Sparta, Georgia. A sixteen-year-old orphan boy listens in rapt attention to the fiery sermon of Rev. Lovick Pierce. Out of the crowd that had come to the Revival, One hundred were saved. Among them was that boy: Richmond Nolley. It was to be the start of an amazing ministry.

After becoming saved, Nolley felt the call to the ministry. In 1807 at the age of seventeen, the Methodist Conference appointed him to preach to slaves in North Carolina. His appointments took him through South Carolina, Alabama and into Louisiana. He would often walk from congregation to congregation with his saddlebags on his shoulders. Not every appointment went smoothly. Nolley was almost drowned by an angry mob in Bayou Teche and had firecrackers thrown at him while he was in the pulpit!

On one of Nolley's journeys he came upon a man just arriving at Choctaw Corner Alabama with his family to set up a home. Upon hearing the preacher's greeting, the man said "What! Have you found me already? Another Methodist preacher? I left Virginia to get out of the reach of them, went to a new settlement in Georgia, and thought to have a long whet, but they got my wife and daughter into the Church; then, in this late purchase; I found a piece of good land, and was sure I would have some peace of the preachers, and here is one before my wagon is unloaded." Nolley responded, "My friend, if you go to heaven you'll find Methodist preachers there; and if to hell, I am afraid you will find some there; and you see how it is in this world; so you had better make terms with us, and be at peace."

In 1814, at the age of twenty-four, Nolley was again appointed to serve in Louisiana. His efforts had lead to a thirty three percent increase in church membership and his service was badly needed.

On his return trip, he and a friend spent the night at Sicily Island. Nolley decided to continue on, although the weather was cold and wet. Friday, November 25, 1814, Nolley stopped at an Indian Village near the present town of Jena. He thought that Hemps Creek, swollen with flood waters, would be too difficult to cross without help and so he hired a villager to help him. It was getting late. Rev. Nolley did not want to spend the night at the village. His flock needed him. He left his saddle-bags, valise, and some books with his guide, mounted his horse and attempted to cross the swollen creek. The current was swift. The banks were steep. Rev. Nolley could not climb to the shore. Nolley fell from his horse into the frigid water and the horse swam back to the Indian guide. He was able to pull himself up by a tree limb and climbed up the steep bank. Nolley yelled across the creek to his guide and told him to bring his horse in the morning. He was going to spend the night with a friend nearby. Cold, wet and exhausted, Nolley walked nearly a mile before collapsing and succumbing to hypothermia. A traveler found his frozen body the next day. From his muddy knees and furrows in the ground, it was made clear that he had spent his last moments on his knees in prayer.

Mrs. Polly Francis made his shroud and Mr. Young hammered out the nails and built the coffin. On Sunday afternoon, he was buried in Catahoula Parish near the road leading from Alexandria to Harrisonburg. There he rested until 1952. In that year, his remains were moved to the lawn of the Methodist church in Jena, and the church was renamed

Nolley Memorial in his memory. His ministry lasted only eight years and he died at the young age of twenty-four, but his memory and legacy lives on today.

Lora Peppers is a Genealogy Librarian with the Ouachita Parish Public Library. She is the compiler of the three volume set of books, "To Meet Us On a Blissful Shore: Collected Ouachita Parish Obituaries" and has lead several local history lectures and walks. Lora can be reached by e-mail at loradpeppers@hotmail.com.