

# Foy, William Ellis

## (1818–1893)

### BENJAMIN BAKER

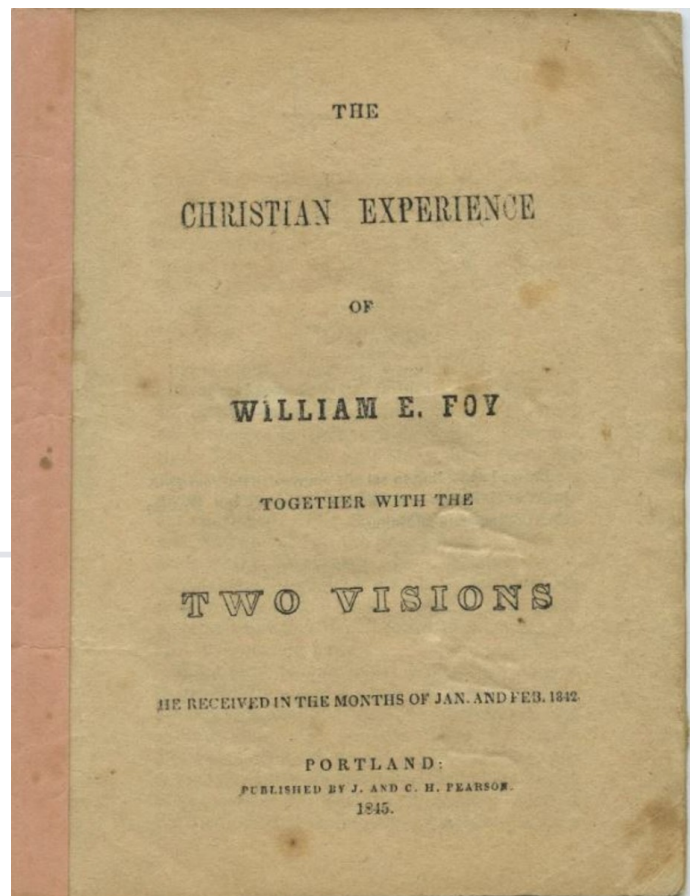
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William Foy was a black Free Will Baptist minister who had religious visions and shared them at Millerite gatherings from 1842-1845. Seventh-day Adventists hold that he was the first of three individuals to receive divine visions during this period, followed by Hazen Foss and Ellen G. White.

### Early Life (1818-1842)

William Ellis Foy (also "Foye") was born sometime around 1818 to black parents Joseph and Elizabeth (Betsey) Foy in Kennebec County, Maine, just north of Augusta. Shortly after Foy's birth, Maine, previously a part of Massachusetts, entered the federal union as a free state to counterbalance the addition of Missouri as a slave state. In 1820 the population of Maine was 300,000, of which 929 were black. Most of these blacks resided in Portland where they earned a living in the maritime industry. In towns such as Bangor and Augusta, blacks worked as domestics, wait staff, mechanics, servants, barbers, and fishermen. The Foyes owned a large plot of land in the country and provided for their needs by farming it. William had three younger brothers and one sister.<sup>1</sup>

When Foy was around 15, his family moved to nearby Palermo, Maine. Frequent visits to the capital city of Augusta brought the teenager to the Free Will Baptist Church. Foy writes that "In the year 1835, under the preaching of Elder Silas Curtis, I was led to inquire, what I should do to be saved."<sup>2</sup> Curtis (1804-1893), the church's white pastor, would gain distinction as an able soulwinner and outspoken abolitionist in his lengthy career. In 1826 he had cofounded the Free Will paper *Morning Star*, which would later report extensively on Foy's ministry.<sup>3</sup> Curtis baptized Foy three months after his conversion. Around 1837 Foy married a woman named



Cover of Foy's 1845 booklet *Christian Experience*.

Photo courtesy of James R. Nix.

Ann, whose maiden name is unknown.

Foy embraced Christianity during a period known as the Second Great Awakening, when mighty religious revivals were sweeping the fledgling nation. This period saw a greater number of blacks and women assuming public roles as preachers and exhorters in churches that had previously only featured white men in the pulpit.<sup>4</sup> At the time of Foy's baptism William Miller was gaining notoriety for his sermons on the imminent advent of Christ. Miller's movement culminated in 1843-1844, the years some scholars consider the peak of the Second Great Awakening.<sup>5</sup> Foy would operate as a prophet to the Millerites during this time.

Not long after his conversion Foy felt called to the ministry, and in 1840 he and his wife relocated to Boston so he could attend seminary. Although Boston was an ethnically diverse metropolis, it was racially segregated, and the Foy's settled on the north slope of Beacon Hill where most of the city's 2,000 blacks resided.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the Beacon Hill neighborhood was one of the nation's centers of black achievement. Between 1805 and Foy's arrival, five black churches—established due to the racial discrimination that blacks experienced in the white Protestant churches in Boston—had been organized on its north slope. One was the First African Baptist Church, also known as Belknap Street Church, which was formed in 1805, the first black Baptist church north of the Mason-Dixon Line. In 1840 approximately forty members, led by George H. Black—who had been the pastor of First African—left the First African Baptist Church to form the Twelfth Baptist Church on Southark Street. Foy would have his first vision among the believers of Twelfth Baptist in early 1842, and during the vision glimpse their pastor among the redeemed in heaven. The other black church on Beacon Hill that William Foy would be closely associated with was the African Methodist Episcopal Church on May Street, which was formed by blacks who had left the nearby Bromfield Street Methodist Episcopal Church in 1818. Foy would have his second vision at this church in February 1842 and speak on his visions for the first time at the Bromfield Street Church.<sup>7</sup>

Boston was a center for the Millerite movement, as well, with Joshua V. Himes' Chardon Street Chapel as the movement's de facto headquarters. Millerism's organ, *Signs of the Times*, was published by Himes in Boston, along with millions of pages of other Millerite literature. The year that Foy moved to the city, the Millerites held their first general conference at the Chardon Street Chapel. William Miller, laying ill at his farm in Low Hampton, was unable to attend, but wrote a letter to Himes that appeared in the November 1 issue of *Signs of the Times*. In it he lamented that he could not be present at the meeting and mentions by name those he "set my heart on...to see and to hear..." Among them were "those colored brethren, too, at Belknap St. with Christian hearts; Heaven, I hope, has stamped them as its favorites."<sup>8</sup> Miller's warm reference was to the black Millerites from First African Baptist Church, which was pastored by George Black, a man with whom Foy was close and would see in heaven in a vision.

The nature of Foy's educational pursuit in Boston is unknown. Several sources state that he was studying to be an Episcopal minister and that when he preached, he wore an Episcopalian robe. In their context, the statements probably mean that Foy was an American Methodist Episcopal, or a Methodist. This is still somewhat

odd seeing that he had been baptized a Baptist, and in his pamphlet *Christian Experience* included an affidavit that he was a member in good standing from the church clerk at the Augusta Free Will Baptist Church. However, in Foy's day there was a degree of denominational fluidity, and the Methodist Episcopal Church could have offered the young black man a scholarship, had a more affordable program of study, or had some other compelling reason for him to study there. Perhaps there were courses offered at Bromfield Street Church, or Foy received training from a Methodist Episcopal minister in the area.

How did Foy support himself and his wife during his years in Boston? A directory from 1841 includes Foy in its "People of Color" section but does not list his profession.<sup>9</sup> However, Foy states in *Christian Experience* that after a three-month speaking circuit sharing his visions, he feared that his family "would come to want," so he "went to work laboring with [his] hands," most likely indicating carpentry or construction.<sup>10</sup> Such side jobs were necessary for many ministerial students and ministers in nineteenth century America.

## Visionary Period (1842-1845)

On the evening of January 18, 1842, William Foy was worshipping with fellow believers at the Twelfth Street Baptist Church. This meeting, in the ethos of the Second Great Awakening, and more directly the manner black captives worshipped in the South, was democratic and egalitarian, full of often-spontaneous preaching, prayers, singing, exhorting, and testifying, from lay and clergy alike. Foy writes that while the attendees were "engaged in solemn prayer...my soul was made happy in the love of God. I was immediately seized as in the agonies of death, and my breath left me; and it appeared to me that I was a spirit separate from this body."<sup>11</sup>

As testified by ten eyewitnesses, Foy was prostrate, in this "inanimate condition," for two and a half hours; it is doubtful that everyone in the meeting stayed, but these ten did. A physician, Henry Cummings, stated, "I was present with our brother at the time of his visions. I examined him, but could not find any appearance of life, except around the heart."<sup>12</sup> Christians of the day would recognize this condition as being a bona fide for an authentic prophetic experience, as occurred to the biblical prophet Daniel while he was in vision. When Foy was revived, his wife Ann testified that he raised his right hand, rose to his knees, and, unable to speak, motioned for water. Upon receiving the water, he splashed some on his forehead, and then could speak. He was asked to share what he had seen and responded that he would as soon as he had the strength to do so.<sup>13</sup>

In *Christian Experience*, Foy details this first vision, in just under 1,500 words. Foy is led by an angelic guide to the bank of a river in which there is a mountain of water in the midst. The bank is crowded with earth's residents, "great and small." The crowd descends into the river, walking on water, until it reaches the aquatic mountain. The righteous in the crowd climb over the mountain and are transformed: their bodies are "made glorious" and they are given "pure and shining garments" and bright crowns. The wicked in the crowd, meanwhile, sink beneath the mountain with cries for mercy. Foy then describes the home of the righteous, a place that Christians would recognize as heaven or paradise. Although similar to the way John describes heaven in

Revelation, Foy supplies an entirely novel scene: e.g., the righteous are given cards with new names on them, an angel who is a human that reunites with his mother, a tree with miniature angels on its branches, and a unique depiction of Christ. Interspersed with the heavenly idyll is a scene of hell where the wicked are still begging for mercy, which Foy can view from his spot in heaven. Being a ministerial student, Foy is concerned for those in hell and asks his guide why there is no mercy for them. The guide replies that the gospel has been preached to them and they have been warned, but they don't believe, so they are without mercy. Shifting his focus to the more pleasant heavenly panoply, Foy sees familiar faces among the righteous in heaven, singing lustily and eating a grape-like fruit from a tree. Foy tries to grab a grape from the tree, but his guide forbids him, saying that those who eat from the tree do not return to earth. "I immediately found myself again," Foy concludes, "in this lonely vale of tears."<sup>14</sup>

It is not known if Foy divulged what he had seen with the ten eyewitnesses at Twelfth Street Baptist after he gained consciousness. But judging from his narrative in *Christian Experience*, he did not. He writes that after the vision, "I was disobedient, settling upon this point for an excuse, that my guide did not command me so to do; and I thereby, brought darkness, and death, upon my soul. But I could find no peace or comfort." Foy continued, "I began to doubt whether indeed my soul had been converted, and although I often met with the people of God, I obtained no relief, but felt distressed and lonely. I could get no access in prayer."<sup>15</sup> To alleviate this desperate state, Foy wrote down the content of his vision and had it published at one of Boston's many printing shops in late January 1842. But he was unsatisfied with the finished product ("it was a very imperfect sketch," he admits) and remained miserable.

Two and a half weeks after his first vision, on February 4, 1842, at the African Methodist Episcopal Church on May Street, Foy had another ecstatic experience. That Friday evening the large sanctuary was standing room only, and like the service at Twelfth Baptist, there was exhortation and prayer. Foy was still disconsolate, stating that he "enjoyed none of the sensible presence of God" because of his failure to properly share his first vision. Toward the latter part of the service, Foy noticed a friend who had been standing and graciously arose to let the friend have his seat. He writes, "While I was thus standing, I began to reflect on my disobedience; and while thus engaged, suddenly I heard a voice, as it were, in the spirit, speaking unto me. I immediately fell to the floor, and knew nothing about this body, until twelve hours and a half had passed away, as I was afterwards informed."<sup>16</sup>

Although this vision lasted a lot longer, Foy narrated it more succinctly than the first vision in *Christian Experience* at 1,138 words. In the vision Foy stands on an earth that is "perfectly level," with the sun shining as at noon. From the west comes a cloud that covers the sun, plunging the scene into darkness, and from the sky bursts something like a "flaming bar of fire." Foy then sees "innumerable multitudes" from the four corners of the earth converge on the bar and stand in complete silence, every face pale from the gravity of the scene. The saints in the crowd are lifted to the bar; their bodies are transformed, and they are given heavenly apparel with cards, and pass through the fiery bar. The rest, all wicked, sink below. Among those who sink, Foy sees churchgoers and preachers. Tragically, some mothers are separated from babies that they hold in their arms,

the babies passing through the bar and the mothers sinking below. Foy is escorted through the bar with the saints and enters a place like paradise, with angels and a being who is unmistakably Christ, chariots on wings of fire, a river, and singing. As in the first vision, Foy sees someone he knows: it is George Black, charter pastor of the Twelfth Street Baptist Church, who would die two weeks later. In the final scene Foy's guide brings him to a narrow door and shows him a mighty angel with a book to his left (the wicked) and one to his right (the righteous). The guide charges Foy to "reveal those things which thou hast seen, and also warn thy fellow creatures, to flee from the wrath to come," promising he would support him. "I will go," Foy responds.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Foy's promise to his guide to warn people by sharing his vision, he writes that he "was at first exceedingly unwilling so to do" because "the message was so different—and the manner in which the command was given, so different from any I had ever heard of, and knowing the prejudice against those of my color, it became very crossing." "The manner in which the command was given" could have referred to the disapproving attitudes of many Millerites and Christians toward those who claimed they had received divine visions. "The prejudice against those of my color" referred to the way that American Christians treated black people, from enslavement of millions of blacks in the South, to discrimination and even terrorization of free blacks in the North. Foy went on to wonder aloud why the visions were not given to "the learned, or to one of a different condition than myself,"<sup>18</sup> which probably is a reference to the little education he had received compared to the highly-educated populace of Boston, and perhaps also his low financial status and youth.

Foy had internal struggles for two days until he received a visit to his house from J.B. Husted, white pastor of the nearby Second Methodist Episcopal Church on Bromfield Street, just blocks from Foy's residence. Word of Foy's supernatural experiences had spread throughout the close-knit Beacon Hill neighborhood, and Husted requested that Foy speak on his visions to his church. Foy agreed to do this the following afternoon. With considerable trepidation, on February 7 Foy related what he had seen so eloquently that he was inundated with more requests to speak, his calendar booked months in advance. "I traveled three months delivering my message to crowded houses," Foy recalled, "enjoying continual peace of mind."<sup>19</sup> Importantly, it seems as if Foy's visions led him to a belief in the soon second coming of Jesus, and to join with the Millerites, at whose gatherings he often spoke. He wrote, "Although before the Lord was pleased to show me these heavenly things, I was opposed to the doctrine of Jesus' near approach, I am now looking for that event."<sup>20</sup>

After circuiting from March to May of 1842, Foy, fearing that his family was not being provided for adequately, stopped touring and engaged in manual labor for another three months in the summer, but "could find no rest day nor night, until again I consented to do my duty." He recommenced lecturing, attesting that although he "suffered some persecution," his vision guide was with him.<sup>21</sup> Foy continued touring throughout 1843 and 1844, when Millerism was at its apogee, with tens of thousands of believers looking for the fulfillment of their hopes. The Millerites booked more halls, held more revivals, convened more camp meetings, and distributed more literature during these years than at any other time. In turn, the Millerite ranks swelled to an unprecedented number.<sup>22</sup>

John N. Loughborough, in the first full-length history of Adventism, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists* (1892), provided the most detailed description of William Foy during the Millerite period, basing it on eyewitness accounts:

While this work of expulsion was going on in the churches, and the loud cry of the message was swelling its notes all over the world, the Lord came near to the comfort of his people by a special manifestation of the gift of his Spirit. There was an educated mulatto in the State of Massachusetts, by the name of Foye, who was an eloquent speaker. He was a Baptist, but was preparing to take holy orders as an Episcopal minister. The Lord graciously gave him three visions, which bore clear evidence of being the genuine manifestations of the Spirit of God. He was invited from place to place to speak in the pulpits, not by the Episcopalians only, but by other denominations. When he spoke, he always wore the clergyman's robe, such as the ministers of that church wear in their services. His visions related to the near advent of Christ, the travels of the people of God to the heavenly city, the new earth, and the glories of the redeemed state. Having a good command of language, with fine descriptive powers, he created a sensation wherever he went. There was one thing, however, in the vision of the pathway of God's people that he did not understand; and that was three steps leading up onto this pathway, such steps of glorious light that he called them "steps of fire." On each of these steps was a great multitude of people; but suddenly many of them disappeared, while those who remained passed onto the second step, where a multitude gathered also; and some of these disappeared, and so on with each advancing step. Those who disappeared seemed to sink down into the step, and were seen no more. He saw the people of God, those who remained, pressing on with joy over the heavenly pathway. This was the part of the vision that troubled him. After Mr. Foye had traveled awhile in various parts of New England, he had his visions printed in a pamphlet, entitled "Foye's Visions...."<sup>23</sup>

In the revised *The Great Second Advent Movement* (1905), Loughborough added the following:

By invitation [Foy] went from city to city to tell of the wonderful things he had seen; and in order to accommodate the vast crowds who assembled to hear him, large halls were secured, where he related to thousands what had been shown him of the heavenly world, the loveliness of the New Jerusalem, and of the angelic hosts. When dwelling on the tender, compassionate love of Christ for poor sinners, he exhorted the unconverted to seek God, and scores responded to his tender entreaties.<sup>24</sup>

Loughborough drew from Ellen G. White's experiences with Foy for his accounts, stating a year after publishing *Rise and Progress* that Foy "lived to hear Sister Harmon relate her first vision, and to testify that the two were identical."<sup>25</sup> By the middle of 1842 William Foy and his family had relocated to Maine, this time Portland, where Ellen White's family, the Harmons, were residing. In a 1906 interview with her assistant Dores E. Robinson, White recalled that the Foyes lived "near the bridge where we went over to Cape Elizabeth," which was probably the Portland Bridge; this would mean that the Harmons and Foyes lived only a few blocks from each other.<sup>26</sup> White stated that on several occasions her father took her by sleigh to hear Foy lecture in Cape Elizabeth, a town on

Casco Bay about eight miles south of Portland. Even more than sixty years later she remembered that he had four visions, details of how he received his visions, and that she purchased *Christian Experience*, although she could not find it despite looking for it.<sup>27</sup>

White first met Foy during a lecture at Beethoven Hall in downtown Portland, a popular meeting place for the Millerites from 1840 to 1845.<sup>28</sup> She provides a memorable recounting of Foy at Beethoven Hall. At the time, the teenaged White had respiratory problems, probably tuberculosis, and so sat near to the front next to the speaker's stand. She describes the experience: "Foy's wife [Ann] was so anxious. She sat looking at him, so that it disturbed him. 'Now,' said he, 'you must not get where you can look at me when I am speaking.' He had on an Episcopalian robe. His wife sat by the side of me. She kept moving about and putting her head behind me." White wondered, "What does she keep moving about so for?" and found out after the meeting when she was privy to a conversation between William and Ann. "'I did as you told me to,' said she [Ann]. 'I hid myself. I did as you told me to.' (So that he should not see her face.) She would be so anxious, repeating the words right after him with her lips. After the meeting was ended, and he came to look her up, she said to him, 'I hid myself. You didn't see me.'" Apparently, Ann Foy was so vested in her husband's speaking performance, and so nervous for him, that she would repeat his words and thus distract him, throwing him off his stride. Despite this, it is clear that Ann Foy was an important part of Foy fulfilling his prophetic commission, right there on the front row to support him.

Ellen White continues her description, recalling, "He was a very tall man, slightly colored. But it was remarkable testimonies that he bore."<sup>29</sup> White's statement that Foy bore "remarkable testimonies" has been used by Seventh-day Adventists to prove that Foy was a genuine prophet. White may have gotten this phrase from Foy's *Christian Experience* pamphlet, which was published by John Pearson, Jr., and his brother Charles, the former of whom is believed to have first introduced her to James White. Pearson wrote in the preface to *Christian Experience* that "the visions of our brother, are certainly very remarkable...."<sup>30</sup>

After the Great Disappointment, in early 1845, Ellen White was scheduled to speak on the visions that she had received at a venue in Cape Elizabeth. William Foy decided to attend, perhaps hearing the buzz about this teenaged girl who purported to have revelations like his. It was here that White first spoke with Foy at length. She recalls:

I had an interview with him. He wanted to see me, and I talked with him a little. They had appointed for me to speak that night, and I did not know that he was there. I did not know at first that he was there. 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. But they extolled him so I think it hurt him, and I do not know what became of him.<sup>31</sup>

Exactly what White meant by the last line "they extolled him so I think it hurt him" is unclear. Foy biographer Delbert W. Baker suggests three possible scenarios: the audience's praise and attention embarrassed Foy; Foy

became prideful and it hurt his influence; or he realized that he had taken the spotlight from the speaker and he regretted it.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the case, it is this transaction that Seventh-day Adventists have historically understood as the passing of the prophetic mantle, as it were. Foy's prophetic ministry was concluded; Ellen White's was beginning.

As White and Loughborough both point out, Foy had a third vision, even though Foy did not include it in *Christian Experience*. Loughborough states that Foy had the third vision "near the close of the twenty-three hundred days" in 1844, and it is certain that Foy publicly shared this revelation, as Loughborough outlines its contents in *The Great Second Advent Movement*

In this he [Foy] was shown the pathway of the people of God through to the heavenly city. He saw a great platform, or step, on which multitudes of people gathered. Occasionally one would drop through this platform out of sight, and of such a one it was said to him, "Apostatized." Then he saw the people rise to a second step, or platform, and some there also dropped through the platform out of sight. Finally a third platform appeared, which extended to the gates of the holy city. A great company gathered with those who had advanced to this platform.<sup>33</sup>

Foy must have intimated to his audiences that he could not understand this vision, as Loughborough writes that the vision "troubled him," "was to him unexplainable, and he ceased public speaking" and that he even after "sickened and died."<sup>34</sup>

However, in her 1906 interview, Ellen White was adamant that Foy had another, fourth vision, although Loughborough doesn't refer to it and Foy does not include it in his pamphlet. White was describing the transmission of either Foy's third or fourth vision in Portland around 1844 when she recalled to Robinson:

Then another time, there was Foy that had had visions. He had had four visions. He was in a large congregation, very large. He fell right to the floor. I do not know what they were doing in there, whether they were listening to preaching or not. But at any rate he fell to the floor. I do not know how long he was [down]—about three quarters of a hour, I think—and he had all these [visions] before I had them.<sup>35</sup>

Several studies comparing the visions of Foy and White have established that there are indeed significant similarities between the two prophets vis-à-vis manner of reception of visions; unique insights on the judgment, the eschaton, and heaven not found in Scripture; and language and structure employed to describe the visions.<sup>36</sup> Rather than charging that White purloined Foy—as many have done over the years—these studies suggest a prophetic overlap and continuity common among biblical prophets, indicating the same inspired, divine source.

Despite William Foy's positive reception by Millerites, he never escaped the bogeyman of racial prejudice, the exact element he initially feared when told to share his visions. Foy stated that he "suffered some persecution," and perhaps this was in the form of a piece that appeared in *The Portland Tribune*, the premier newspaper in his hometown, on February 10, 1844, which no doubt refers to Foy:



When will Wonders cease? 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. It is said the fat and greasy black, can neither read nor write—but he told of the joys of the blest and the wailings of the damned with such gusto, that even the weakest disciple of the prophet smacked his lips for more....We soon expect to see this fat bull nigger, superbly dressed, seated in a chariot, and drawn through our streets, by the devoted disciples of Miller, who will bow down and worship him as a God<sup>37</sup>

The general tenor of this piece takes on the mocking tone of most of the coverage of Millerites by the popular press, but with an ugly racial element that draws on the era's worst caricatures of blacks. An indirect insight of the piece though is an acknowledgment of some Millerites' high esteem for Foy.

It is not known how William Foy handled the final disappointment on October 22, 1844. However, on January 3, 1845, he registered *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy Together with The Two Visions He Received in The Months of Jan. and Feb. 1842* with the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the State of Maine. The 24-page pamphlet was published by John and Charles Pearson, Millerite brothers who later were charter Seventh-day Adventists, in the hope "that the despised and humble few, who are patiently waiting for the appearing of their glorious King, may be refreshed and comforted, in this hour of trial, while perusing these two visions...."<sup>38</sup> The pastoral Foy wished to provide solace to the advent believers, and averred that his faith in the second coming remained steadfast: "I am now waiting for my coming Lord...I am now looking for that event. I expect soon to see the tall and mighty angel. 'Then shall I be satisfied, when I awake in his likeness.'" He concludes with a rousing message to Millerites, writing, "Ye saints of God, lift up your heads, for the glories of an earth made new, will soon be yours."<sup>39</sup>

John and Charles Pearson's preface to *Christian Experience* affords insight into Foy's ministry and the way he was viewed by Millerites. "The visions of our brother, are certainly very remarkable, and when related by him in public assemblies, have been blessed by God to the awakening of sinners, reclaiming of backsliders, and the building up of the saints in the most holy faith," the brothers write.<sup>40</sup> The entire preface is in fact very much like the apologies that Adventists would later write as front matter of Ellen White's books in defense of the perpetuity of spiritual gifts. The Pearsons asserted that God spoke to the patriarchs and prophets through visions, and to Stephen, Paul, and John. God continued to give revelations after the canonical period, most notably to the third century African martyrs Perpetua and Felicity, and William Tennent, a Presbyterian clergyman in 1806. Considering Foy to be the latest in the grand continuum of seers, the Pearsons wrote that "there is a most beautiful resemblance in the views here given, with the visions of Ezekiel, Daniel and John."<sup>41</sup> The pamphlet follows the classical structure of spiritual memoirs: conversion experience, visions, struggle over the divine mandate to tell others, breakthrough, and closing exhortations. As *Christian Experience* begins with a vouching for Foy's prophetic gift, so it ends with a testimonial of authenticity signed by the ten eyewitnesses to Foy's first two visions covered in the pamphlet.<sup>42</sup>

## Post-Millerite Ministry (1845-1892)

By the time *Christian Experience* was published in 1845, William Foy (who would go by "Foye" for the rest of his life) had returned to the Free Will Baptist Church in Augusta where he had been converted a decade earlier, and he embarked on ministry in that denomination. His preaching license was renewed for one year in June at the church's Quarterly Meeting in Windsor, Maine.<sup>43</sup> In March 1848 he signed a protest against slavery with 616 of his fellow Free Will Baptist ministers, which stated in no uncertain terms that slavery: was a "political curse" to the nation; was in direct violation to Christianity and the principle of equality; sustained and encouraged "almost every sin with which our land is cursed;" prevented the influence and preaching of the gospel; and was "a fearful outrage upon humanity." The ministers were therefore publicly withdrawing "all implied or supposed, voluntary, political or moral support" of slavery and refusing "to sanction the system of Slavery in any manner whatsoever." The Free Will Baptists would withhold "Christian and church fellowship from all guilty of the sin of slavery."<sup>44</sup>

Foy was ordained later in 1848, and was subsequently appointed to positions of leadership, such as the "corresponding messenger" to the Waterville Quarterly Meeting.<sup>45</sup> He ministered among blacks in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and organized a small church there. However, Foy was financially supporting himself, and took ill under the burden. He wrote to his mentor Silas Curtis for assistance on July 27, 1850. Foy stated that the church that he had established "has gone down," and he had been sick for most of the summer. Meanwhile, his mother, who was living with Foy, had also taken ill. Foy wanted to move his family back among friends in Maine but didn't have the money to do so. He concluded by asking Curtis to raise some funds to relieve his situation, which Foy wrote "is more painful than you can think or imagine, unless you could witness the scenes."<sup>46</sup> In response, Curtis directly appealed to Baptists to financially assist Foy in the church's main organ, *The Morning Star*, vouching that he had baptized Foy and he was a devoted Christian. Almost a month later at least \$13 was raised for Foy (about \$430 in 2020).

During this time, William Foy's marriage to Ann Foy dissolved. On August 8, 1850, he published a notice in the *New Bedford Mercury* that Ann "has left my bed and board, without just provocation on my part, I therefore forbid all persons harboring or trusting her on my account, as I shall pay no debts of her contracting after this date." The census that year recorded one resident in Foy's house, his mother.<sup>47</sup>

Almost a year later On August 17, 1851, Foy married Caroline H. Griffin of Gardiner, Maine. Griffin was born in 1823 to Reuben and Frances Griffin, a black couple who farmed a plot of land in Gardiner.<sup>48</sup> William and Caroline had a son, Orrin S. (Orin/Oren), in 1852, and a daughter, Lauraitta (Laura), in 1856. Caroline Foy died either while giving birth to Lauraitta or shortly after.

In early December 1851 it was reported that Foy "solemnly and powerfully dispensed" the word at the Windsor Quarterly Meeting in Maine.<sup>49</sup> From late 1853 to early 1854 he preached for a revival series in Sidney and nearby Belgrade, Maine, leading approximately 60 people to Christ. The new believers initially worshipped in a schoolhouse, but soon constructed a church, whose dedication Foy participated in on June 27, 1854.<sup>50</sup>

In April of 1858 Foy held a revival in Boothbay, Maine, and baptized 20 people. Later that year he held meetings in Belmont, Maine, and led six to Christ.<sup>51</sup> Significantly, Foy preached alongside white ministers, and baptized mostly whites in these Northern New England towns. In this he followed in the footsteps of several pioneering black Free Will ministers who labored among whites, most notably Charles W. Bowles (1761-1843):<sup>52</sup>

A widower for the second time, Foy married Amelia F. Bowe (born c. 1837), a black woman from Brunswick, Maine, on July 7, 1858.<sup>53</sup> As something of an anomaly to his New England itinerating, Foy ministered in Michigan for a brief time. He held meetings in Detroit and Troy in March-April 1860 and reported baptizing 11 at the meeting's close on April 15. In a follow-up meeting in May in a barn in which 600 were said to be in attendance, eight more were baptized.<sup>54</sup> Foy continued to hold meetings in Detroit, where he reported that "the Lord has appeared in great power. Backsliders have been reclaimed and sinners converted."<sup>55</sup> He was back in Maine by mid-1860; the 1860 census taken in Burnham on July 5 lists him as residing in the home of Riley and Mary Whitten, a white farming couple in their late twenties, with his wife Amelia (23), Orrin (7), Lauraitta (4), mother Betsey (73), and two other boarders. From late 1860 to early 1861 Foy held a four-month meeting in Newburgh that saw 40 return to the church, and 21 profess belief for the first time.<sup>56</sup> He remained in Newburgh into late 1862, assuming the role of a pastor.

On the last day of 1862, a note appeared in *The Morning Star* from Benjamin Fogg, a clerk for the denomination. A Quarterly Meeting had been held that December and took an action against Foy in his absence. Fogg reports: "Wm. E. Foye is not considered worthy of our confidence as a preacher of the gospel. He is not a member of the F.W. Baptist denomination; his labors among the churches of the Unity Q.M. have been detrimental. We recommend the churches not to recognize him as a Christian minister." Foy's last appearance in *The Morning Star* had been on May 7, 1862, as author of an obituary of one of his parishioners in Newburgh; about eight months had passed until Fogg's note appeared. Foy, whose labors had heretofore been a tremendous asset to Free Will churches, was now deemed detrimental to the cause, at least to a group in Maine. It appears that by the time Fogg's note that Foy had either left the denomination or been disfellowshipped, and, by Fogg's language, may have been ministering in an unauthorized capacity in those eight months.<sup>57</sup> In July of the next year another note appeared from Fogg, stating that "if Mr. Foye wishes to know why the Unity Q.M. took such action relative to him, he is hereby notified to meet it at its next session" which was to be held at the Free Will Baptist church in Bangor in September.<sup>58</sup> There is no indication that Foy ever responded to Fogg or was present for the session. In fact, the action by the group in Maine apparently did not affect Foy from ministering as he usually did, albeit in a non-denominational capacity. From 1863 until the end of his life thirty years later, Foy would simply be a Christian minister.

Another family tragedy was to strike Foy in the critical year of 1863 for the United States and the destiny of Foy's fellow blacks. On September 17, his seven-year old daughter Lauraitta died of diphtheria. *The Morning Star* touchingly confided that "Little Laura talked very calmly about her death, spoke of meeting her mother [Caroline] in heaven (mother deceased) and made many consistent remarks about heaven."<sup>59</sup>

After the death of his daughter, William Foy stayed in or around Bangor, Maine, for a few years, engaged in some type of ministry. He next appears in Mount Desert Island, Maine, the state's largest island, in 1867, where he organizes a "Christian Church" with 25 members in the village of Otter Creek in the town of Mount Desert.<sup>60</sup> Foy moved northeast up the coast to Plantation No. 7, a rural area near today's Sullivan, Maine, where he purchased a plot of land for \$10 (\$181.55 in 2020) on January 10, 1868, and another property on November 15, 1869, for \$5 (\$94.78 in 2020).<sup>61</sup> The 1870 census for Plantation No. 7 only records William Foy ("preacher") and his 19-year old son Orrin ("mariner") in Foy's household. Foy's mother, Betsey, had died on January 2, 1870, but the fate of his wife Amelia is not known. In March-April 1872, Foy conducted a series of meetings with a W.P. Jackson that resulted in 20 conversions.<sup>62</sup>

Later in 1872 he held meetings again in Sidney, Maine, where the newspaper reported "a good religious interest prevails, under the ministrations" of Foy.<sup>63</sup> His labors continued in Sidney and nearby Augusta well into 1874, the newspaper reporting that friends had invited him to "labor" there.<sup>64</sup> On January 11, 1873, the *Maine Farmer* of Augusta reported that "Wm. Foye, a colored preacher of this city, in one year and a half, made eleven quilts, one containing 3,454 squares and another with 650 squares, no two being alike; and besides this, he preaches six sermons a week."<sup>65</sup> Foy was also a builder, constructing his own house and one for neighbors Alvah and Ila Griffin.<sup>66</sup> Foy's house and property must have been an attractive situation, for when he died twenty years later his home was purchased by a lumber magnate who renovated it and "made it into an ideal country home where he...doubtless entertain[ed] his friends...."<sup>67</sup> In the midst of this busy and varied schedule, Foy married for the fourth time, this time to Parcentia Rose in Bangor, Maine, on July 1, 1873.<sup>68</sup>

Into the 1880s William Foy was a religious fixture in Maine communities. Lay historian Leila A. Clark Johnson in her history *Sullivan and Sorrento Since 1760* gathered from oral histories that Foy "was esteemed and beloved" in Sullivan, although there are details that do not match with other reports. Johnson states that "tradition has it that [Foy] was an escaped slave from New Jersey" who came to Sullivan in the 1860-1870s, and that "neighbors have a very clear memory of a very dark complexioned, colored man, small in statue (sic) with white curly hair, wearing a tall silk hat and swallowtail coat...."<sup>69</sup> Despite the physical discrepancies between her account and Ellen White's and John Loughborough's, Johnson is speaking of Foy, whose other details she provides make it impossible for it to be anyone else. She states that Foy held religious meetings in Temperance Hall, a fraternal order's meeting place, and several schoolhouses in Sullivan. In 1889 the *Bar Harbor Record* reports on a party held in Plantation No. 7 at the home of a William Johnson, where a picnic took place under a large awning. The town chef prepared an assortment of delicacies, there was organ music, and "Elder Foye gave a short and appropriate address."<sup>70</sup>

William Foy continued holding meetings into the 1890s. On November 19, 1891, the *Bar Harbor Record* reported that he was holding a series of meetings at the Magadore School building in Steuben, Maine.<sup>71</sup> Almost two years later, Foy died from chronic prostatitis and cystitis at his home in Plantation No. 7 on November 9, 1893.<sup>72</sup> He is buried with his daughter Laura in Birch Tree Cemetery in Sullivan, Maine. Inscribed on Foy's tombstone are the

words of the apostle Paul to Timothy: “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.”

Meanwhile, in the world of Seventh-day Adventism, William Foy’s name was kept alive, appropriately by Adventism’s first historian. John Loughborough produced the first history of the church, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists*, a year before Foy’s death, citing him as evidence of “the loud cry of the message swelling its notes all over the world” and “the Lord [coming] near to the comfort of his people by a special manifestation of the gift of his Spirit.”<sup>73</sup> In February of 1893 Loughborough again summoned Foy, this time in an article in the *General Conference Bulletin* building a case for the gift of prophecy in the church: “God began to manifest this gift [of prophecy] in the first message [the first of the three angels’ messages] before the time passed [October 22, 1844], as early as 1842.”<sup>74</sup> Loughborough went on to even more overtly connect Foy with the fulfilment of the 2300-day prophecy in an article called “The Prophetic Gift” in the *Review and Herald* of July 18, 1899: “The first to be noticed is that of a godly man,—a well-educated and talented minister by the name of William Foy, who resided in Boston, Mass. At two different times during the year 1842, the Lord came so near to him that he was wrapped in holy vision....” Loughborough shares highlights from Foy’s first two visions then continues: “Brother Foy’s work continued until the year 1844, near the close of the twenty-three hundred days. Then he was favored with another manifestation of the Holy Spirit....”<sup>75</sup> But Loughborough would dwell the longest on Foy’s prophetic work in the two printings of his updated and expanded *Rise and Progress*, retitled *The Great Second Advent Movement* in 1905 and 1906, respectively. The year of the latter’s publication, Ellen White had her wide-ranging interview with Doris E. Robinson on her Millerite and early Sabbatarian Adventist days. The importance that Loughborough and White placed on Foy’s visionary period would see a renewal from Adventists near the end of the twentieth century.

## Legacy

Seventh-day Adventists have generally acknowledged that God first chose a black man to be a prophet, followed by Hazen Foss, and finally Ellen Harmon. However, Foy, along with Foss, would become tragic figures in a cautionary tale repeated ad nauseum for the fate of those who reject God’s call: as Loughborough put it, Foy “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.”<sup>76</sup> Foy and Foss have often been confused and conflated, enhancing the poignancy of the narrative that God moved on from these failed men to “the weakest of the weak,” the teenaged girl, Ellen Harmon, who went on to become the unrivaled prophet of the Advent movement.

However, there is evidence that black Adventists throughout history did not totally buy into the rejection narrative, but instead maintained that Foy at least partially fulfilled his calling. One noteworthy example of this is the “General Conference Souvenir Edition” of the *North American Informant*—the organ of black Seventh-day

Adventists—of March-August 1965, which casts the history of black Adventism in a triumphant narrative. The first article “Roots in the Millerite Movement,” by Frank L. Peterson, then a vice president of the General Conference, presents prominent black Millerites Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and his daughter Rosetta Douglass Sprague, and William Grant Still. Considerable space is spent highlighting Foy’s prophetic ministry, and then an entire article on his first vision taken from *Christian Experience* is featured. The following article emphasizes the prophetic continuity between Foy and White.<sup>77</sup> Another example is from the *North American Regional Voice* (the retitled *Informant*) of April 1980 which covers the “origins” of black Seventh-day Adventists and states, “Not since Biblical times was the prophetic gift manifested among God’s people. During the Millerite movement, God appointed a black man, William Ellis Foy, to instruct and reprove his people.”<sup>78</sup> It is only stated that Foy faithfully shared his visions, with nothing mentioned about any refusal. In other places, even when black Adventist authors stated that Foy eventually rejected the prophetic call, they pointed out that God did call a black man, Foy was initially obedient to the call, and Ellen White was positively influenced by Foy and held his visions to be genuine.<sup>79</sup>

Delbert W. Baker’s *The Unknown Prophet*, published by the Review and Herald in 1987, represented a watershed in the legacy of William Foy and the way Adventists viewed Millerite history and early Adventism.<sup>80</sup> *The Unknown Prophet* uncovered original research on the life of Foy, showing that contrary to Loughborough’s assertion, Foy did not get sick and die after his visions in the early 1840s, but had a productive Christian ministry of half a century longer. Baker’s work disproved the prevailing notion that Foy rejected the divine mandate to share his visions: Ellen White and her family heard him lecture on his visions and she asserted that his visions were remarkable, Foy publicly shared his visions to thousands of Millerites, and he published a pamphlet of his visions. As for the third and fourth visions, Loughborough knew the contents of his third vision and shared it in his books, so Foy must have told others of it; and Ellen White knew of the fourth vision, so he must have told others about that, too. Finally, Baker made the case that God had a specific purpose for Foy to fill and Foy fulfilled it; it was never God’s purpose that Foy’s prophetic ministry be as extensive as Ellen White’s.

Embedded narratives die hard, and *The Unknown Prophet* did not change everyone’s view of Foy; but there is evidence in subsequent church publications and communications that it did do much to shift it.<sup>81</sup> For many Seventh-day Adventists, William Foy is now evidence that God does not regard color, and that in one of the historically lowest periods for African Americans, God entrusted a black man with revelations for his advent people. Many black Adventists now take considerable pride that blacks were integral in the earliest history of their church.

In this spirit, recent discoveries have been made of a greater number of black Millerites and early Adventists than previously thought.<sup>82</sup> With the digitization and uploading of historic material to the internet, there are undoubtedly more discoveries to come. William Foy, then, is a visible representation of faithful blacks that have been a part of and helped shape the Advent movement from its inception.

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13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 9-15. Foy biographer Delbert W. Baker organizes Foy's first vision into eleven scenes with two interludes (Baker, 87-102).
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29. Ibid., 3.
30. Foy, *Christian Experience*, 5.
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