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BRIEF MEMOIR OF THE REV. JAMES BLAIR, COMMONLY
CALLED COMMISSARY BLAIR.

IN No. III. of the present volume, pa. 118, notice was taken of the venerable James Blair; and a further account of him was promised. We are sorry that our materials allow of nothing more ample than the following meagre narrative. The memory of a man so distinguished in Virginia, ought not to be forgotten. He was not, indeed a member of that society to which we belong; but he was a man of learning, of talents, of piety and zeal; and we have been taught to respect learning and talents, to love the pious, and to revere benefactors of mankind, and especially of our own country, whatever name they may bear. We hold that there is only one Church, namely, that of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that all who are united to him by a living faith, are brethren.—Peace be to all that call on the name of Christ, “both *their* Lord and *ours!*” We reverence the memory of Blair, and of all who, like him, devote their lives to the glory of God and the good of man.—It ought to be known that the principal part of the following memoir is given in the words of the celebrated Dr. Waterland.

We embrace this opportunity of correcting a mistake, pa. 118 of this volume. It is there stated that James Blair of the general court was son of the Commissary. Now the Commissary had no son; James Blair was his nephew.

JAMES BLAIR (some time Commissary of Virginia,) was born and educated in Scotland. After having finished his studies, he was ordained and beneficed in the Episcopal Church in that country. But meeting with some discouragements, under an unsettled state of affairs, and having a prospect of discharging his ministerial function more usefully elsewhere, he quitted his preferments there, and went into England, some time in the latter end of King Charles the

In conclusion, Blair was a man who would have done honour to any society in any age of the church. May the example of his piety, his liberality, and public spirit find imitators among all denominations of christians in our country!

[The following communication was made by a gentleman of the highest respectability. All who know him, know that his accuracy is remarkable, and his veracity unimpeachable. The person who gave the following statement to the writer, namely the Rev. James Hunt of Maryland, was well known to many gentlemen now living. If we have been correctly informed, he was a man of unquestionable truth, and practised much of the old fashioned rigid exactness, both in conduct and conversation. An account of the origin of Presbyterianism is given by Mr. Davies in a letter to Mr Bellamy of Bethlehem, dated June 28, 1751, and published in Gillies' *Historical Collections*. Glasgow, 1755, pa. 330-338.— This account differs in some particulars from that which follows. But these differences are not such as to invalidate the truth of either narrative. We shall notice them in the progress of the piece, and offer such observations as the nature of the case may suggest.

We would take this opportunity of saying that we thank our correspondent for his communication; and that we should gladly receive any well written accounts of the rise and progress of any of the churches in Virginia.— Documents or narratives that throw light upon the civil or ecclesiastical history of our state, would be in the highest degree acceptable. Fragments thrown into the Magazine, the proper authorities being given, would afford materials to aid the future historian, who shall (as we hope will one day be the case) write a history worthy of the name and deeds of Virginia.]

ORIGIN OF PRESBYTERIANISM IN VIRGINIA.

ALBEMARLE, May 6, 1819.

My Dear Friend,

I have long wished to see in print a full as well as a correct account, of the origin of Presbyterianism in Hanover county; the effects of which have been so extensive and salutary; and a knowledge of which, it seems to me, is so necessary to the right understanding of the history of religion in Virginia. I have seen several things in print relative to that subject, but have never met with any thing so full, as the following narrative, which I received verbally many years ago

from the Rev. James Hunt of Montgomery county, Maryland. The state of mind in which I then was, it is not necessary to mention: I will only say it was favorable to the receiving of indelible impressions from the facts stated by him. And it was, to me, a very interesting subject, I have frequently since repeated what I heard, and by that means it has been the more firmly fixed in my memory: so that I feel an entire confidence that in putting it on paper I shall give the narrative, substantially as I received it from Mr. Hunt in the year 1792.

THE NARRATIVE.

“ In the year seventeen hundred and ——— there were in the county of Hanover no dissenters from the established church. And by law, every person who did not regularly attend the parish church was subjected to a fine, recoverable on information, before a civil magistrate. An absence of — sabbaths from church, rendered the persons liable to the penalty. Four gentlemen, of whom Mr. Hunt's father was one, at the *same time* became convinced, (I do not remember by what means) that the **Gospel* was not preached by the minister of the parish; and that it was inconsistent with their duty to attend on his ministrations. The consequence was that, unknown to each other, they absented themselves on the same day. They having all been remarkably regular in their attendance; and if I recollect truly, having held some office in the parish, their absence was soon noticed; and a summons issued for them to appear before the proper officer to answer for their delinquency. As they had absented themselves on the same day, it was their fortune to be called on the same day before the same officer. And here, for the first time, each one found that three of his neighbours were delinquents as well as himself, and for the very same cause. Seeing no reason to change their opinions, or to alter the course they had adopted, they determined to subject themselves to the payment of the fines imposed by law, and attended the church no more. But as this determination was dictated by a conscientious regard to duty, they now believed that they were bound, not only to pursue the course already begun, but in addition, to adopt another. They believed that the sabbath was ordained, though not exclusively, yet principally, for the purpose of social worship; and they could not think of spending it in solitude. But to public worship, elsewhere

* It was about this period that the distinction between *evangelical preachers* and their opposites took its rise.—Ed.

than at the church they were utter strangers. The pressing necessity of the case, however, suggested to them the lawfulness and expediency of uniting to improve the sabbath in the best manner they could. They agreed to meet every sabbath, alternately, at each other's houses, and spend the time with their families, in prayer and reading the scriptures, together with Luther's Commentary on the Galatians—an old volume which, by some means, fell into their hands. *I do not remember Mr. Hunt's mentioning any other book. They might however, as I have seen stated, have had another.—They did not persevere long in this way until rumour spread the report through the neighbourhood, that these four gentlemen and their families had not only forsaken the church, but had formed some kind of society among themselves; the people knew not what, nor for what purpose. Curiosity prompted the desire to be among them—one and another begged for admission, till their houses, on sabbath, were crowded. And here a new scene opened upon their astonished view. Numbers were pricked to the heart—the word became sharp and powerful—"what shall we do?" was the general cry. What to do, or to say, the principal leaders knew not. They themselves had been led by a small still voice, they hardly knew how, to an acquaintance with the truth; but now the Lord was speaking as on Mount Sinai, with a voice of thunder, and sinners, like that mountain itself, trembled to the centre.—They, however, stuck by their prayers, and their Luther, and their Bible. And it was not long before they had the happiness to see a goodly little number, healed by the same word that had wounded them, and brought to rejoice, understandingly in Christ Jesus.

And now their number became too large for any private house to contain them. Another step is taken—they build first one and then another of what they called "reading houses." Here the number of attendants and the force of divine influence much increase. The charge against the four principals, first engaged in the work, is changed—they are no lon-

* "In the year 1740, Mr. Whitefield had preached at Williamsburg at the invitation of Mr. Blair our late Commissary. But we being sixty miles distant from Williamsburg, he left the colony before we had an opportunity of hearing him. But in the year '43 a young gentleman from Scotland had got a book of his sermons preached in Glasgow, and taken from his mouth in short hand; which after I had read with great benefit, I invited my neighbours to come and hear it; and the plainness and fervency of these discourses being attended with the power of the Lord, many were convinced of their undone condition, and constrained to seek deliverance with the greatest solicitude." Samuel Morris's communication to Davies. See Gillies, pa. 231.

ger considered as individual delinquents, whose obstinacy might be sufficiently punished by the civil magistrate; but as a malignant cabal, that required the interposition of the Executive. They are accordingly cited to appear before the Governor and Council. This was a shock for which they were not well prepared. The exaction of frequent fines, for non-attendance at church, they bore with patience and fortitude for the sake of a good conscience; but to be charged with a crime, of the nature, and extent, and penalty of which they had but indistinct conceptions, spread a gloom over their minds, and filled them with anxious forbodings, more easily conceived than described. They were placed in the most awkward situation. They were certainly and obviously a religious society, separate and distinct from the only one, the established church, which either the government, or the people, knew in the country; yet they were without a name.— They saw and felt the propriety of being able some how to designate themselves, when they came before the Governor and Council. They once thought of calling themselves **Lutherans*, but they found some sentiments advanced in the only one of his books which they had, with which they could not agree. In the mean while the day drew on when they were to appear in Williamsburg; and with gloomy forbodings they

*“About this time, our absenting ourselves from the established church, contrary, as was alledged, to the laws of the land, was taken notice of, and we were called on by the court to assign our reasons for it, and to disclose what denomination we were of. As we knew but little of any denomination of Dissenters, except Quakers, we were at a loss what name to assume. At length recollecting that Luther was a noted reformer, and that his books had been of special service to us, we declared ourselves Lutherans; and thus we continued till providence sent us the Rev. William Robinson.” See Gillies as before.

This discrepancy may be accounted for on the supposition, that when Morris, Hunt and their associates were called before the county court, they assumed the name of *Lutherans*; but that afterwards, finding some things in the writings of that reformer, of which they did not approve, they disclaimed his name. As a sect without a name then, they might have been summoned to appear before the Governor and Council. The only objection appearing to this supposition in the terms of the quotation is, that Morris says, “thus we continued till providence sent us the Rev. Mr. William Robinson.”—We apprehend, however, that the writer does not mean, that they continued to be called Lutherans until Mr. Robinson came; but, more intent on the business in which they were engaged, than the name by which they were designated, he means to say, that thus they continued to meet and conduct their religious services until Mr. Robinson came.

The omission respecting the Scotch Confession of Faith, and the people being acknowledged as Presbyterians by Governor Gooch, might have been made through delicacy by Mr. Davies. He knew that his letter would be sent to Europe for publication, and he might not have wished that any thing should go from him to the public respecting Gooch's having deserted his church for preferment.

set out without a name by which to call themselves, and without any written plan to shew the nature of the association which they had formed. One of the four, who travelled down by himself, had to take shelter from a heavy storm of rain in the house of some poor man on the road. While there, waiting for the rain to cease, he to divert his melancholy, took down from a dusty shelf, an old dusty volume, and began to read. He had not read far, till he found himself not diverted, but deeply interested. He found his own sentiments embodied in a system. He read on with renewed pleasure and surprise, until the ceasing of the storm admonished him it was time to pursue his journey. He wished to know of the man whether he would sell *that* book. The man answered, no: but if he had any desire for it, he would give it to him, as he had no use for it, and it was not worth selling. Our poor distressed traveller received it as the gift of heaven—it was an old Scotch Presbyterian Confession of Faith. Meeting his companions in Williamsburgh, they took a private room, and there deliberately examined the book, and found it contained exactly the system of doctrines which they believed; and though not so well understanding the discipline, they did not so cordially approve that, yet, they unanimously agreed to adopt it as their confession of faith. Although they did not foresee the advantage it would be to them, yet it relieved them from the awkward situation in which they were, the heads and leaders of a religious society without a name.—When called before the Governor and Council, and interrogated about their profession, they presented their new found book, as their confession of faith. The Governor, Gooch, (who it was said had been educated a Presbyterian, but for the sake of an office or for some other reason, had become a member of the established church,) immediately observed, on seeing the confession, that these men were Presbyterians, and that they were tolerated by the laws of England. But the Council, not feeling the same educational prejudice in favor of Presbyterianism, or not construing so liberally the laws relating to them, were not so easily satisfied—a good deal of bitterness was manifested by them towards the poor unfortunate culprits. But in the midst of this warm discussion (Mr. Hunt observed he had often heard his father mention it with awe and reverence,) the heavens became suddenly shrouded in darkness—thunders with tremendous peals seemed to shake the foundation of the house where they were; and the council chamber where they sat, appeared for a considerable time to be one continued blaze of lightning. The Governor and Council, as well as themselves, were seized with solemn awe.—

Mr. Hunt's father told him, he had never before, nor afterwards, witnessed so tremendous a storm. When it abated he and his companions were dismissed with a gentle caution to beware not to excite any disturbance in his majesty's colony, nor by any irregularities break the good order of society in their parish.

Here Mr. Hunt stopped, to make a number of pertinent remarks on the various providences of God. Had not a storm driven one of those persecuted men into an unknown house for shelter—had the Governor not been educated a Presbyterian—or, finally, had not the clouds gathered blackness at that particular hour, it is probable the issue of their journey to Williamsburg would have been extremely different from what it was. He did not think there was any thing miraculous in any of these occurrences; but he thought (and so do I) that a man must be strangely blinded, who does not see, in such a train of unconnected contingent events, all concurring to the same end, the secret, though powerful hand of him who, "works all things according to the council of his own will."

For these providential interpositions they felt sincere gratitude, and returned again to their families, their friends and their Reading House; and again wielded, with considerable effect among the people, the old weapons, their prayers, and their Luther, and their Bible. But they were in a peculiar, and delicate and novel situation. Here was a goodly number of christians—a congregation of Presbyterians, who had never been organized, not one of whom had ever seen a Presbyterian preacher, nor, in their apprehension, had ever heard an evangelical sermon, held together merely by the principles of the Gospel which they had imbibed from the Bible.—How long they continued in this state I do not recollect, but it became at length evident that they would not much longer, hold together in this manner. Already difference of opinion had arisen which threatened the most serious evils.—Some of their number, carrying some of the peculiar and distinguishing doctrines of the gospel to a licentious extreme, began to deny, not only the merit of good works, but their necessity—not only the *efficiency* of means, but their expediency, so that it was made a serious question among them, whether it was right to *pray*, as prayer could not, and it would be impious to desire it should alter the divine purposes. At this critical time, from some friend in the upper counties they heard that a Mr. Robinson, a presbyterian preacher, was travelling through what were then called the back counties in Virginia, and that there was very generally where he preached,

a work going on similar to that in Hanover. They immediately deputed two of their number to go and invite Mr. Robinson to come and preach in Hanover; *but they were directed not to make themselves or their errand known unto Mr. Robinson until they had heard him preach; and not then, if they were of opinion that he preached the doctrines of the Gospel as understood among them. They went. They heard, and, on consultation, were divided in opinion. One thought that he was, in his preaching, entirely evangelical; the other, who was verging to the licentious extreme already mentioned, thought he dwelt too much on the necessity of works, and urged too strongly the use of the means; and was afraid that thereby he at least clouded the doctrines of grace, and threw a veil over the glories of divine sovereignty in the salvation of man. But as they could not agree between themselves, it was determined that they should give him a cordial invitation in the name of the congregation, and if he would go to let the people judge for themselves. On application to Mr. Robinson, with a statement of their circumstances, as narrated above, he felt himself much embarrassed. On the one hand, the call appeared extraordinary; on the other, if he complied, it would break in, very disagreeably, upon his previous arrangements, and cause a good many disappointments. He requested a little time to answer. He retired; and after some time returned and told them he would go with them.— Coming to Hanover, the whole county was moved. Their reading-house was soon filled to overflowing. But a venerable spreading oak, embowered with the surrounding shades, gave him and the people shelter. A divine energy attended his labours. Many were the convictions, many the hopeful conversions. I do not remember how long he stayed with them, but it was a considerable time: not only preaching to them, but counselling them; and before he left the county, he brought them into some kind of church order on the Presbyterian model.† Having completed his work and labour of love among them, he prepared to take his departure thence. Previous to this, however, the people had raised a considerable contribution, not merely as a compensation for his faithful labours among them; but principally as an expression of

*“ Being satisfied about the soundness of his principles,” &c. Gillies, as above.

†“ Before Mr. Robinson left us, he successfully endeavored to correct some of our mistakes, and bring us to carry on the worship of God more regularly at our meetings. After this we met to read good sermons, and began and concluded with prayer and singing of psalms, which till then we had omitted.” See Gillies, pa. 322.

that gratitude they felt towards Mr. Robinson, as the honoured instrument of so much good to them. But he modestly declined their liberality: assigning for the reason of his refusal not only the delicacy of his and their situation—that the enemies of the cause of religion might, should he receive it, endeavor to represent him as a mere mercenary, and thus wound and injure the infant flock; but chiefly because he did not need it; the Lord having blessed him with independence as to fortune, and being thus able, he wished to preach without being burdensome to those among whom he went preaching the gospel. These reasons, though strong and unanswerable, could not silence the pleadings of their heart felt gratitude—a gratitude which found no other way of exercising itself towards its object, but by some offering of this kind. They therefore repeatedly urged his acceptance, but he constantly and firmly declined the offer. Seeing no hope of his receding from the determination he had taken not to receive their money, the committee entrusted with it, put it into the hands of the gentleman with whom he was to lodge the last night of his stay in the county, with directions to convey it privately into his saddle-bags, not doubting, but when, after his departure he should find himself in possession of the money, he would appropriate it to his own use. This was accordingly done. And in the morning Mr. Robinson having taken an affectionate leave of his kind friends, his saddle-bags were handed to him; but he found them much more ponderous than when he came there. Searching for the cause, like Joseph's brethren of old, he found the money in the sack's mouth.—Pleased with the benevolent artifice, he, smiling said “ I see
“ you are resolved I shall have your money. I will take it.
“ But, as I have before told you, I do not need it. I have
“ enough. Nor will I appropriate it to my own use. But
“ there is a young man of my acquaintance of promising talents and piety, who is now studying with a view to the
“ ministry, but his circumstances are embarrassing, he has
“ not funds to support and carry him on without much difficulty. This money will relieve him from his pecuniary
“ difficulties. I will take charge of it and appropriate it to
“ his use. And so soon as he is licenced we will send him to
“ visit you. And if you should be pleased with him, and he
“ should be pleased with you, it may be that you may now by
“ your liberality, be educating a minister for yourselves.”—
Mr. Robinson did as he said. The poor young man completed his education, much sooner than he could have done without that seasonable and providential aid. And when licensed, was immediately, on Mr. Robinson's motion, directed by the

Presbytery to visit Hanover county in Virginia. The stranger came, and, lo! it was the great Samuel Davies!!* You, and the world know the sequel.

P. S. I forgot to mention that the Rev. James Hunt, from whom I received the narrative, was himself a witness to much that he related, being then quite a young man, and if I recollect right, a subject of the revival while Mr. Robinson was with them. Of this, however, I am not confident.

MEMOIR OF SAMUEL DAVIES.

(Continued from page 330.)

EXTRACTS FROM HIS DIARY.

WE shall offer to our readers a few other extracts from Davies's Diary, and then proceed with the narrative of his life.

“*Tuesday, February 26.* Staid at home in the morning, preparing to preach a charity sermon to-morrow; the prospect of which is very terrifying to me—Went P. M. to the house of Lords with the Rev. Mr. Thomson, and was introduced by a Mr. George Baskerville, a lawyer, whose company I enjoyed on the way, and in the evening. He is the most facetious mortal I ever conversed with; and sometimes he gives such a loose to his wit, that one would think he has no respect to any thing sacred; and yet he gave five guineas to the College, and talked at times very pertinently on divine subjects—The house of Lords is but an ordinary old building; but the assembly is the most brilliant and august that one can conceive. It was opened by a prayer read by the youngest bishop; at which all but members were ordered to go out; but Mr. Thomson and I were conveniently concealed behind

* This is altogether omitted in the narrative of Davies. We can well imagine that he would not choose to publish such an event concerning himself. It would look so much like boasting that he came heaven-directed to Virginia.—The account given of this matter in our 3d No. pa. 116, is different from this, as to some particulars. We received it from an old lady, who in her youth heard the story. It is entirely likely that Mr. Hunt's recollection was more accurate than hers. As to the main facts, namely, that money was raised for Mr. Robinson, that he refused to accept it, that it was appropriated to the use of Davies, and that this had an influence in his settlement in Virginia, there can be no doubt.