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EAST TENNESSEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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GIDEON BLACKBURN

BY V. M. QUEENER

I

Gideon Blackburn was a benefactor of those people, white and red, who lived in the Tennessee territory while it was a new section of a new nation. His work was not spectacular enough to be carefully recorded by his contemporaries. To them, Gideon Blackburn was a preacher who performed his tasks in an unusually eloquent and persuasive manner and little more. To us of this day, he is not a forgotten man but one rarely mentioned.

On August 27, 1772, Gideon Blackburn, another descendant of that numerous clan of empire-builders, the Scotch-Irish, came into the world. The place was Augusta county, Virginia.¹ His parents were devout Presbyterians; they were not overly blessed with worldly goods nor were they the poorest in that frontier country.² His father was Robert Blackburn, whose name does not appear on the tax roll, nor among the land owners of Augusta county.³ Robert Blackburn was the son of Benjamin Blackburn, who fought with Andrew Lewis at Point Pleasant in Dunmore's War and moved to the Tennessee country sometime before 1786. One of Robert's brothers, General Samuel Blackburn, was more successful in accumulating wealth. He fought with Washington in the Revolution, taught school, served as a member of the Virginia legislature, and was a successful lawyer. He accumulated a considerable estate in which his nephew, Gideon, shared three years before the latter's death. Gideon, being a minister, received the major part of the old general's library; his cousin, Samuel, Jr., received the pistols and the imported shotguns.⁴ Gideon's mother was, before her marriage, a Miss Richie or Ritchey.

¹ Thomas Rinaker, "Gideon Blackburn, the Founder of Blackburn University", in *The Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield, October, 1924), 398-410; William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (N. Y., 1858), 43.

² Rinaker, *loc. cit.*, 399.

³ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 401.

During his early years, Gideon lived with his grandfather, Benjamin Blackburn, the disabled veteran of Point Pleasant. Why it was necessary for him to live with his grandfather, or when his father or mother died is not known, but it seems that Gideon¹ was an orphan from an early age. Upon the death of his grandfather, Gideon, now a lad of fourteen or fifteen, went to live with a maternal uncle, Gideon Ritchey, for whom he was named. This uncle was unmarried and made his living by manual labor, but he was able to give his nephew a home, much encouragement, and some help while the latter was securing his education.⁵ The boy showed promise of unusual intelligence and was a hard worker, not only at his studies, but at manual labor which he performed in order to help support himself. For a while he worked at night, tending a sawmill where he earned a dollar per night, and instead of "sleeping on the job," he spent his idle moments studying by the light of the fire which he was engaged to keep.⁶

When Gideon was about fifteen years of age he was converted, or, as he put it, "received the Renewing Grace" and felt that he was "called" to preach. His life work now decided upon, he set out to procure a literary education at Martin's Academy, an institution which was founded and presided over by Tennessee's first pastor and teacher, Samuel Doak. When he had about finished his course at the Academy, his uncle moved into Jefferson county, and Gideon went along. Here, both Gideons lived with John Blackburn, a paternal uncle of the younger Gideon.⁷ As he did not feel that his education was complete, his literary studies were continued and, in addition, he began the study of theology under the guidance of Dr. Robert Henderson, who lived five miles away at Dandridge. Gideon was particularly fortunate in securing Dr. Henderson as a teacher, for Henderson was "endowed with the greatest talent for public speaking." He was "able to move an audience as he willed." With his matchless mimicry, command of voice, countenance, attitude, gesture, grotesque humor, and solemn appeals, he drew crowds and had his way with them.⁸ How much of this necessary equipage of a frontier preacher was inculcated or developed in the young man, is a matter of conjecture, but within a few years, he was known throughout the Tennessee region as an eloquent and powerful preacher. Gideon

⁵ Sprague, *op. cit.*, 43.

⁶ Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1882), I, 384.

⁷ Sprague, *op. cit.*, 43.

⁸ J. E. Alexander, *The Synod of Tennessee* (Philadelphia, 1890), 89.

Blackburn completed his theological course and was licensed to preach by the Abingdon Presbytery in 1792.

His education finished, he wasted no time about entering upon his life's work. In the same year he set out with a company of soldiers marching to Fort Craig, the present site of Maryville.⁹ This recently educated, not yet ordained, man of twenty, was tall, straight, large framed, with a face of homely but strong features topped with long black hair. He not only carried a rifle and other equipment of a soldier, but also a Bible and a hymn book. All were to be used by him in making "good Indians." Soon after his arrival at Fort Craig, he built two log houses, one a dwelling where he intended to begin his "housekeeping." The other was to house the New Providence church which had been organized some eight years before by a Virginia minister named Archibald Scott.¹⁰ Blackburn became the first pastor of the New Providence church in 1792. One year later, on October 3, 1793, the young minister was married to a cousin by the name of Grizzel Blackburn. To this union were born eleven children, four sons and seven daughters. Two of his sons became ministers and a third died while preparing to become one.¹¹

At Maryville he did not stop with one church but became pastor of a second called Eusebia church, located ten miles east of Maryville. In addition, he made many trips with the soldiers, travelling from fort to fort, preaching to the soldiers and the scattered groups of settlers.¹² He often took part as a soldier in Indian wars, sometimes even leading the soldiers into battle.¹³ He was always ready to wield the sword, but his work as a minister, to some extent, eased the wounds made by the barbed edge of civilization as it cut down a weaker people.

In frontier society the minister was not exempt from manual labor. He must fell trees, clear land, and plant corn, much as any layman, and in addition, prepare his lengthy sermons. Blackburn's sermons were usually prepared as he worked. Often, while ploughing, he would leave a piece of paper and an inkhorn on a stump near the end of the field. On this paper he would write the main topics or headings of his discourses as thought produced them. Then,

⁹ Sprague, *op. cit.*, 44.

¹⁰ Will A. McTeer, *History of New Providence Church* (Maryville, 1921), 37; Edgar A. Elmore, "A Pioneer of the Old Southwest, Gideon Blackburn, M. D.," in *Home Mission Heroes*, (N. Y., 1904), 45ff.

¹¹ Sprague, *op. cit.*, 47.

¹² Elmore, *loc. cit.*; Alexander, *op. cit.*, 87.

¹³ Sprague, *op. cit.*, 50.

while continuing his ploughing, he would go over and over his skeleton speech mentally, until he had filled out and organized each part.¹⁴ No doubt, many a discourse, reeking with fire and brimstone, was produced while he peacefully tilled the soil. His sermons, however, always had the power of the extemporaneous and never the mechanical ring of a memorized speech. "He rarely wrote out a sermon, and never read one in the pulpit."¹⁵ This habit of composing his sermons as he worked became dominant and in later years he much preferred to prepare his sermons while riding on horseback from place to place, or while walking the floor of his study.

As a preacher, even from the beginning of his ministry, "one source of his power with an audience was his ability at painting Scriptural scenes and presenting them vividly as present realities so that an auditor could say, 'I seem to have been seeing rather than hearing.'"¹⁶ He not only held his audience by the brilliance of his speech; his appearance commanded attention. He was two or three inches over six feet in height.¹⁷ He was of a lanky build, but straight and strong, with the carriage and movement of a military man. Later in life he was handicapped by lameness caused by "White Swelling."¹⁸ His face was expressive and intellectual. His keen blue eyes would flash as he warmed to his subject. His portrait, doubtless touched up, is not unlike Stuart's Thomas Jefferson. His dignified, but kindly attitude, "his sweet, musical, and powerful voice, his wonderful earnestness, vivid delineations, his solemn and sometimes awful appeals so absorbed the attention and impressed the mind and heart, that the hearer became unconscious of the lapse of time." A story is told of a man who was in haste to reach his home after a business trip to Columbia, but on hearing that Dr. Blackburn was then preaching at the courthouse, he decided to stop a moment and hear him. Upon reaching the court-house, he found it crowded with people and, being unable to enter, he leaned against the door post to listen for a minute before continuing his journey. An hour later, at the end of the sermon, he stretched his body, stiff from an hour of occupying the same position, and remembered that he had intended to stay only a moment.¹⁹ But this is anticipating; by our story it is not yet 1800 and Gideon Blackburn has been a minister less than eight years.

¹⁴ Alexander, *op. cit.*, 89.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁷ A. Nevin, *Encyclopediæ of the Presbyterian Church* (Phila., 1884), 75.

¹⁸ McTeer, *op. cit.*, 39.

¹⁹ Alexander, *op. cit.*, 89.

II

In 1794 Gideon Blackburn was ordained by the Abingdon Presbytery, the frontier battleground between Old and New School Presbyterianism. Did Christ die for all or only for the elect, was the absorbing question. In comparison, the great hullabaloo over Modernism versus Fundamentalism of recent date was a drop in the bucket. Two years after Blackburn became a member of the presbytery, a question concerning some article of faith arose and the conservative members walked out. Blackburn remained, seemingly unexcited about the matter. One year later (1797) Union Presbytery was organized, consisting of the liberals who refused to walk out of the Abingdon organization. The division was made partly for convenience and partly on doctrinal grounds; but both presbyteries carried on in dissension, suspending or dismissing a member occasionally. Amid this strife, other denominations found a fertile field in eastern Tennessee.²⁰

Reverend Blackburn was a New School Presbyterian, even going so far as to sanction "the Jerks." On one occasion he wrote: "I have not only heard of it and seen it, but have felt it and am persuaded that it is only to be effected by the immediate finger of God."²¹ One must not get the idea that he was not orthodox in so far as the teaching of his own presbytery was concerned, for when Samuel Carrick was "out-argued on a point of faith," by one of his bright theological students, named Isaac Anderson, the student was turned over to the more able theologian Reverend Blackburn. After the student had visited in his home for an afternoon and evening, where he was asked many sharp questions and left to think out his own answers, he saw the light.²² Having seen the light, he held on to it, for he was the sort of man who refused to trade horses with a good Quaker of Maryville because the latter refused to take ten dollars "to boot."²³

While Dr. Carrick was teaching his theological students and while the two presbyteries were carrying on their disputes, Gideon Blackburn was busy. He was the pastor of two churches ten miles apart. He preached at several different forts and communities, where churches were later organized. He cultivated his farm, and marched with the soldiers. He explained his military activities by writing:²⁴

²⁰ James Phelan, *History of Tennessee* (Boston, 1888), 220-21.

²¹ Nevin, *op. cit.*, 75.

²² John J. Robinson, *Reverend Isaac Anderson* (Knoxville, 1860), 36-39.

²³ McTeer, *op. cit.*, 44.

²⁴ Blackburn to Morse, June, 1807, in *Panoplist*, III, 39.

I settled in that part of the state called Blount County, when the Cherokees were engaged in a bloody and destructive war with our frontiers. As this circumstance frequently called out the youth of my charge in defense of their country and exposed them to the vices attached to military life, I chose at some times to go with them on their expeditions and thereby, was led into the causes of the savage and wretched state of those Indians.

Gideon Blackburn differed from most of the frontiersmen, including preachers of his day, in that he saw and regretted the misery and wretchedness of the unfortunate Indians. While the relations between the Indians and whites were such that Gideon Blackburn had to preach with his rifle standing within arm's reach, he was formulating plans for the carrying of a message of hope instead of one of death to the red man. In 1799 he suggested that Union Presbytery undertake mission work among the Cherokee. He also planned a missionary society for Blount county, but was forced to abandon the enterprise, as he explained, "because of the scarcity of money and the poverty of the people."²⁵ But the poverty of Blount county, and the "embarrassing difficulties" within Union Presbytery, did not dampen the spirit of Blackburn. He began to draw up outlines of a plan with the hope of presenting it to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church at some future date.

In 1800 the General Assembly appointed a committee on foreign missions. Two years later this committee called for foreign missionaries (Indian missions were for some time called foreign missions) to the Cherokee; but there was no response.²⁶ In the following year, Gideon Blackburn, the thirty-one year old frontier preacher, was sent as a delegate to the General Assembly from Union Presbytery. His hope was that he might find some way of bringing his plan for an Indian mission before the committee on missions. In his pocket were outlines of an educational plan for Indian children. This plan he presented to the members of the committee. They, remembering their call the previous year, requested the planner to become the doer and to put into execution what he had well planned. Two hundred dollars were donated by the General Assembly to carry out the plan and to pay Blackburn for two months service as a foreign missionary.²⁷ Thus, the first missionary of the General

²⁵ Samuel T. Wilson, "The Synod of Tennessee and Foreign Missions", in *Minutes of the Synod of Tennessee* (October, 1928), 73-76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Blackburn to Morse, *loc. cit.*, 40.

Assembly of the Presbyterian Church was sent on his way rejoicing.²⁸

III

Gideon Blackburn had his commission and two hundred dollars, but more than these, he had a heart filled with enthusiasm for the new work. With his commission from the church tucked in his pocket with his school plans, he journeyed to Washington to meet President Jefferson who was not enthusiastic about missionary work, but was kind-hearted, sympathetic, and broad-minded. Here he received not only the approbation of the president but letters of recommendation from the secretary of war and instructions for the Indian agent, Colonel Return J. Meigs, to help him get his work under way.²⁹ On his return trip to Tennessee he "collected four hundred thirty dollars and some books" with which to begin his school.

He reached home in July, 1803, and began writing letters and holding interviews with the Indian councils. In his letters, or, as the Indians called them, "talks", Blackburn stated the advantages of a school among the Cherokee. He took great care, however, to promise nothing which he could not fulfill, for, as he explained, a "single failure would have destroyed my credit and ruined the design." In the fall of 1803 some two thousand Indians of the Cherokee nation came together to receive their annuities. Before this group Blackburn laid his plans and stated the conditions necessary to put them into execution. After two days of deliberation the Indians gave their approval and promised to send their children to the school. They agreed that the school should be located on the Hiwassee river near the present town of Charleston, Tennessee, because the Indians of that locality were "most unlikely to be civilized." A house for the teacher which also served as a dormitory for the girls was constructed. The teacher selected was described by Blackburn as being a "man of prudence, good sense, and piety; with a heart fully set on the work. His family was conveniently small consisting of a wife and one child." A school house was constructed in such a way as to serve for class room, dining hall, and sleeping quarters for the boys.

The school opened in the spring of 1804 with twenty-one Indian children in attendance, all of whom gave "flattering evidences of

²⁸ Wilson, *loc. cit.*, 73-76.

²⁹ Joseph Tracy, *History of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions* (N. Y., 1842), 68.

promising geniuses." One of the first difficulties to arise was that of keeping the children at the school. Blackburn solved this problem by getting the chiefs to agree that any child returning home would forfeit the clothes which the school had given him. If a chief failed to send the clothes back to the school an amount equal to their value might be deducted from the chief's next annuity and used for the benefit of the school. In the school strict discipline was maintained without difficulty. The curriculum consisted of the "Shorter Catechism... together with other short questions of similar nature," songs, reading simple passages, ciphering, and "spelling off the book." At the opening and closing of school each day a song was sung, a portion of the Scripture read, and a prayer offered. Public oral examinations were held frequently; a grand prize was given to the pupil who had made the greatest progress since the last examination and small prizes were given to all others according to merit.

Many adult Indians attended the school about as regularly as the children. The teacher took advantage of this situation and tried to teach the children many things which he wanted their parents to know. As soon as an Indian child was capable, he would be used as an interpreter. The children would be seated on the floor in a semi-circle, with the parents on the outer edge. A sentence or a question would be given to the interpreter, who in turn would give it to his fellow pupils and incidentally to the parents present. This process would continue for a few minutes; then all would join in "one of those songs of Zion." Blackburn thought the singing was very effective for he said:

I will not say music can *transform*, but sure I am, it has a remarkable tendency to *soften*, the savage mind. I have seen it so impressive that old warriors (who are remarkably averse to feelings) have sprung on their feet in time of a song, clapt their hands on their breasts, and in the Cherokee language exclaimed, "my heart sing too."

The teacher and his wife not only taught the three R's but how to keep clean, what and when to eat, how to play, and how to dress. Food was supplied by Blackburn and prepared for the table by the master's wife. The clothing of the pupils consisted mostly "of striped cotton or plain linen, manufactured in Tennessee, and made up by the master's wife, as each scholar stood in need."

In the fall of 1804 the school was almost wrecked because of a shortage of blankets. No beds were used, but blankets were an

absolute necessity. Blackburn got permission from Colonel Meigs, the Indian agent, to enroll his pupils as adult Indians and by this subterfuge he drew twenty-six blankets from the government and saved his school.³⁰

In July 1805, General Smith and Colonel Meigs, commissioners of the United States, and Governor Sevier, commissioner for the State of Tennessee, with three or four hundred other white people, met the principal chiefs of the nation and many common people for the purpose of making a treaty. The meeting place was on the Hiwassee river, twelve miles below Blackburn's school. An interesting part of the treaty-making program was that taken by Blackburn, his teacher, and his entire group of "scholars." Of this Blackburn wrote:³¹

There I attended with my school. . . Our passage to the place was indeed romantic. Figure to yourself 25 little savages of the forest, all seated in a large canoe, the teacher at one end, and myself at the other, steering our course down the stream, a distance by water of nearly 20 miles. To see the little creatures sitting neatly dressed in homespun cotton, presented them by the females of my white congregation, their hearts beating with the anticipation of their expected examination, frequently reviewing their lessons in order to be ready; then joining in anthems of praise to the Redeemer, making the adjoining hills and groves resound with the adored name of Jesus—what heart could have remained unmoved!

On the 4th of July we arrived at the place of treaty. . . the school was introduced, marching in procession between the open-ranks of white and red spectators. Each scholar read such a portion, as was requested. The different classes then spelled a number of words without the book. Specimens of their writing and cyphering were shown, and the exhibition closed by the children singing, with a clear and distinct voice, a hymn or two, committed to memory. The scene was very impressive. Few of the spectators were unmoved, and many shed tears plentifully. The Governor, a hardy veteran who had often braved the dangers of war in the same forest, said to me, "I have often stood unmoved amidst showers of bullets from the Indian rifles; but this effectually unmans me. I see civilization taking

³⁰ The information in the last few paragraphs is found in a letter from Blackburn to Morse, November 10, 1807. *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 417.

the ground of barbarism, and the praises of Jesus succeeding to the war whoop of the savage." All this time the tears were stealing down his manly cheek.

After this exhibition of his ability to teach savage children, Blackburn was requested to establish a second school in the lower part of the nation. He hesitated because he had no instructions from the committee on missions and no money with which to carry on the work. "My own private property was insufficient to bear the whole cost," he wrote. But seeing the need he determined to extend his work; and on August 26, 1805, his second school was opened with "from twenty to thirty scholars." By this time, he had heard from the committee on missions, only to be told that they could not extend their benevolence to the second school, nor could they spend more than two hundred dollars "as first stipulated" on the Hiwassee school. This second school was established and supported during the first year by Blackburn without aid from anyone. During this time he had been suffering severe pain and had lost the use of one leg. This suffering, he wrote, "wasted my body, depressed my spirits, and broke my constitution." In the spring of 1806 he made a trip through the South in search of health and aid for his Indian schools. He was successful, writing upon his return: "I collected upwards of fifteen hundred dollars, and at the same time was relieved almost miraculously from my bodily afflictions."³²

The first school established by Blackburn was called Hiwassee; the second, established one year later, in August, 1805, was called Blackburn Mission and was located on Sale creek about three miles from the present Sale Creek church in Hamilton county. In fact, he might be called the founder of the famous Brainerd Mission for which Missionary Ridge was later named. For while he was caring for his Maryville and Eusebia congregations, running his farm, and looking after his two mission schools, Daniel Ross, father of Chief John Ross, secured his co-operation in establishing a little private school for the Ross children and others on Chickamauga creek.³³ Shortly afterward, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions took over the school and established the Chickamauga Mission, the name of which was changed in 1818 to Brainerd Mission. At first, this was a private school, but it was located nearly forty miles from the Sale Creek Mission, thus taking considerable time and effort on the part of Blackburn to help organize,

³² *Ibid.*, 475-76.

³³ Zella Armstrong, in a letter to the writer, September 25, 1931.

supervise, and recommend the teachers, all of which he did, seemingly without any compensation.

Blackburn carried on his missionary work for seven years, sacrificing his personal welfare, that of his family, and his good health. The necessary money he raised as best he could, contributing all he could possibly spare himself. In addition to his trip through the South, already mentioned, he traveled through the North in 1807, and in seven months time collected between five and ten thousand dollars, many books, and much clothing. While on this trip, Gideon Blackburn scattered abroad the missionary spirit. On July 1, 1807, he preached to more than three thousand people in the tabernacle at Salem, Massachusetts. Members of the congregation who remembered George Whitefield compared Blackburn's voice and eloquence with Whitefield's and concluded that they were all but equal. Dr. Samuel M. Worcester wrote: "Blackburn produced a sensation which was beyond anything that was ever known in that community."³⁴ In the same year he was honored by being invited to preach a missionary sermon before the General Assembly, for which that generous group gave him a rising vote of thanks. People called Gideon Blackburn's work among the Cherokee successful. In 1807 Dr. Isaac Anderson and Joseph Lapsley, a committee representing Union Presbytery, reported:³⁵

We attended at and examined the Highwassee Indian school, and do highly approve of the progress the children have made in every branch of literature they have attempted: reading, writing, cyphering, spelling off the book, and singing spiritual songs. Their progress is really flattering in these different branches and perhaps is not exceeded in any school amongst ourselves. . . we highly approve the method of teaching and the order of the school, and the children appear to have as just conceptions of order, and as cheerfully to submit to discipline, as any children. The school contains from 45 to 50 scholars.

More recent writers give Blackburn credit not only for teaching some four or five hundred Indians how to read, write, cipher, spell, and sing hymns, but for developing a civil government among the Cherokee, with a constitution, legislature, and laws suited to their needs. He taught them how to build roads and how to develop their agriculture. Writing of their advance in this respect he noted:³⁶

³⁴ Samuel M. Worcester, *Samuel Worcester* (Boston, 1852), II, 63.

³⁵ Isaac Anderson and Jos. B. Lapsley to Union Presbytery, January 1, 1807, in *Panoplist*, III, 86.

³⁶ Alexander, *op. cit.*, 44.

Population, 12,395 Indians and 341 whites. One hundred and thirteen of the latter had Indian wives. Negro slaves 583. Cattle, 20,000; horses, 6100; hogs, 19,600; sheep, 1037. Thirteen grist mills, 3 saw mills, 3 saltpetre works and one powder mill were in operation. They had 50 wagons, 500 ploughs, 1600 spinning wheels, 467 looms and 49 silversmiths.

Because of continued impaired health, and the growing needs of his family, Blackburn gave up his mission work and resigned the pastorate of the New Providence church in 1810 and went into retirement.

IV

In the autumn of 1810 Blackburn sold as much of his property as he could and moved into Middle Tennessee, locating in Maury county, near Columbia. Here he was supposed to be resting in order to regain his health but, instead, he was preaching three or four times each week at various places in the county. It seems he could not find a suitable location in Maury county, for in the spring of 1811 he moved to Franklin in Williamson county. Here he became principal of Harpeth Academy and preached regularly in four or five places, founding a church in each of these places.³⁷ When he arrived in Middle Tennessee he found religious activity at a low ebb; but because of his power as a preacher a revival was felt at once and at his first communion service, held in the open near Gallatin, Tennessee, some three thousand persons were present and forty-five members were added to the church.³⁸ In his first year in the central part of the present State of Tennessee, he organized the Presbytery of West Tennessee, as it was then called. He founded a number of churches, among them the First Presbyterian church of Nashville.³⁹ This church he organized on November 14, 1814; he was its first pastor and preached to such people as Mrs. Andrew Jackson, Felix Grundy, and Governor Carroll. His three and a half to four hour sermons seemed a bit long to Carroll, but Grundy remarked after a morning service of considerable length that he "could have stood it until twelve that night if Blackburn should have continued until that time."⁴⁰ Dr. Blackburn had regained much of his

³⁷ Nevin, *op. cit.*, 75; Sprague, *op. cit.*, 45.

³⁸ Elmore, *loc. cit.*, 61.

³⁹ Armstrong. See Note 33.

⁴⁰ E. H. Gillett, *History of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, 1864), II, 317-33; William E. Beard, *First Presbyterian Church of Nashville* (Nashville, 1915), 47-52.

former strength and again walked with the sprightly step of a military man.

In his youth he had longed to be a soldier; now at the age of forty he was again tempted. Some writers have said that he was Andrew Jackson's chaplain during the Creek War. That is not the case, for he was in charge of two churches and was principal of a school while the war was being fought. He was, however, a soldier long enough to recruit a company of volunteers and lead them to Jackson's camp in Northern Alabama. The army was in a bad predicament because the terms of enlistment were expiring rapidly and the men, refusing to re-enlist, were going home in squads and by companies. Blackburn, in a letter to Jackson, offered his services and was requested to raise a company of volunteers and lead them to camp. This he did in company with William Carroll. On their way into Alabama they met General Coffee's army on its way home. Blackburn preached and urged the men to return and continue to serve their country; however, the army continued on its homeward journey and was never in the field again.⁴¹ Jackson knew Blackburn; he had heard him preach a number of times. On this trip Blackburn showed the spirit of determination which many people called contrariness, or even haughtiness. The young volunteers and their parents had requested that the men not serve under a certain one of Jackson's lieutenants. When they arrived in camp, Jackson forthwith assigned them to that lieutenant. Blackburn objected and a verbal encounter of no mean proportions ensued. It looked as though they would come to blows, but the preacher-soldier had his way, probably because Jackson, even at that early date, respected religion and religious leaders. The two men exchanged civil courtesies and parted friends.⁴² While in camp, Blackburn preached to the soldiers, and because of this it has been reported that he was their chaplain.

Blackburn remained in Franklin until 1823, his principal work being that of a teacher. In addition to his work at the academy he tutored candidates for the ministry, taking them into his home and equipping them to go out and care for the churches which he was prone to establish. As a teacher, he was not a finished scholar. He knew little of the science of that day, little Hebrew or Greek, and little of mathematics. He was "strong in logic, rhetoric, mental and moral philosophy." He was a good disciplinarian, sometimes called

⁴¹ John S. Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, 1927), I, 357, 365; James Parton, *Life of Jackson* (N. Y., 1861), I, 466; 476.

⁴² J. W. Hall, in Sprague, *op. cit.*, 49-50.

stern and severe. Religion was the central motive in his problems of discipline as well as in all phases of his life. Aside from his work as a teacher he was engaged with his churches and was one of the moving spirits in the religious revival which swept much of the Southwest about the year 1816. It was during this "awakening" that Rachel Jackson was converted and became a strict, austere, and militant Presbyterian. That religious malady known as "the Jerks" was prominent during these revivals; and just prior to this, Cumberland Presbytery had broken away from the parent church, partly because the General Assembly would not sanction either the licensing of illiterate preachers or exaggerated forms of religious conversion.⁴³ Rachel was converted by the preaching of Dr. Blackburn and ever afterwards thanked her Maker that she had been called by such a minister. Through her Blackburn became rather intimate with Andrew Jackson; and his influence made Jackson an observer of the Sabbath while he was governor of Florida, much to the dislike of the Spaniards who had paid no attention to such matters prior to the arrival of the Jacksons. Jackson did not join the church until after his presidential administrations; but under the influence of Rachel and Gideon Blackburn, he had thought the matter over and privately professed, promising to join the church as soon as he was no longer a candidate for public office. He always respected those who "wore the cloth" and in particular Gideon Blackburn, whom Rachel called her "father in the Gospel."⁴⁴ While Jackson was president, the Reverend J. W. Hall, a friend of Blackburn, called upon him and Jackson's first question was about his "much respected friend, Dr. Blackburn." He was handed a letter from Blackburn, written for the occasion, in which he again urged upon the president the necessity of a public profession.⁴⁵ Jackson complied with the request about 1839.

For a number of years Blackburn had been a trustee of two Tennessee colleges, Greeneville and Washington. In 1818 the former conferred on him, in recognition of his great work, the degree of Doctor of Divinity. In 1817 when the Synod of Tennessee was organized, Gideon Blackburn was elected its first clerk. Two years later he was chosen moderator. In 1823, his last year in Tennessee, the Synod was in session near Nashville, at the time Governor Carroll was inaugurated for his second term. The Synod was invited to attend and Blackburn led in prayer after the oath of office was ad-

⁴³ Gillett, *op. cit.*, 213-242.

⁴⁴ Mead Minnigerode, *Some American Ladies*, (N. Y., 1926), 271ff.

⁴⁵ Hall, *loc. cit.*, 50.

ministered. To this prayer, "a most decent and solemn attention was paid, not only by the General Assembly, but also by a large, well-behaved crowd of spectators."⁴⁶

During his stay in Middle Tennessee he had grown in prominence, provided for his growing family, and accumulated some property, part of which consisted of negro slaves; but by 1823 his health was again very poor.

V

In 1823 Blackburn was invited to the First church of Louisville, Kentucky, as a supply preacher. After his first or second sermon he was called to assume the pastorate of that church. Here he preached for about four years. The church prospered, the membership increasing from fifty-one to one hundred thirty-three, and the church became wealthy and aristocratic.⁴⁷ While working in this vicinity, he came into conflict with the circuit court, when a will drawn by him for one of his most faithful church members was set aside. This member, converted by Blackburn, was wealthy; and he was greatly influenced by his preacher. During his last days, Blackburn wrote his will, by which all of his slaves were set free and provision made for their support and removal to Africa. The remainder of the large estate was given to benevolent work.⁴⁸ Partly because of his reputation as a money-raiser and minister, and because he had long been connected with school work as a director of colleges and the principal of an academy, he was called to the presidency of Centre College at Danville, Kentucky, in 1827.⁴⁹

His work at Centre did not attract much attention nor bring him much of an income, for during his second year here, his Maryville property was sold because of non-payment of taxes.⁵⁰ The college was small, the total number of graduates during his term as president being only fourteen.⁵¹ During his presidency Blackburn continued his practice of preaching in churches of the vicinity. Another physical handicap appeared during these years—a cancer on his lip. It was removed once but soon reappeared in an aggravated form. It gave him much pain, especially a few years later, and was a great

⁴⁶ Alexander, *op. cit.*, 61.

⁴⁷ Minutes of the First Church of Louisville; Shackelford Miller, *Sketches of the First Church of Louisville* (Louisville, 1916).

⁴⁸ Hall, *loc. cit.*, 46.

⁴⁹ Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Kentucky* (N. Y., 1847), 320-21.

⁵⁰ *Knoxville Register*, June 18, 1828.

⁵¹ Dr. C. J. Turck, in a letter to the writer, November 27, 1931.

handicap. In 1830 he resigned and moved to Versailles, Kentucky, where he served as pastor and as travelling agent for the Kentucky Temperance Society.⁵² Dr. Blackburn was now nearing sixty years of age and seemed restless and discontented. In 1831 he made a trip into Illinois. This was a new country. The Black Hawk War was just getting under way and new prairie land was about to be opened to the insatiable appetite of the land hungry. Blackburn came back to Kentucky to move again; and with this last move in mind, he began disposing of his property. Two of his negroes were freed and accompanied him to his new home as hired servants. Some others were emancipated and urged to move to Liberia, but two "very unruly ones" were sold because they were unfit for freedom and could not be taken to Illinois.⁵³

Before the good man now in his old age makes this last attempt to find a place to live, let us look at another side of his life. At home, Gideon Blackburn was a stern, serious, and a devoutly religious husband and father. He concerned himself, not only with the moral welfare of his immediate family, but with that of his servants and students who might be living or studying with him. All had to read the Bible a great deal, to pray and take active part in the religious life of the community. It was his custom when at home on Sunday to call all members of the household into the parlor and there question them on what they had read during the day or the past week. He, acting as teacher, would explain and exhort.⁵⁴ Aside from his home life, where he was respected, revered, and dearly loved, he had a nation-wide circle of friends and some enemies. He was not one to mince words, nor one who failed to speak the truth as he saw it. He was earnest, narrow, and uncompromising. Necessarily, such a man made enemies, but Blackburn's were comparatively few and he had the happy faculty of not being worried by them. He was widely read and a considerable collector of books. At his death nearly a thousand volumes from his library were sold for auction.⁵⁵

In October, 1833, Dr. Blackburn with his family and some neighbors, moved into Macoupin county, Illinois. Here he entered 560 acres of land; and in June, 1834, he organized "Spring Grove Presbyterian Church," of which, of course, he was the pastor. By this time he had a second son in the ministry, Samuel E. Blackburn, who

⁵² Alexander, *op. cit.*, 88.

⁵³ Hall, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Rinaker, *loc. cit.*

needed a church. Shortly after the organization of Spring Cove church, a second was organized at Carlinville, with Samuel E. Blackburn as pastor. In 1835 Dr. Blackburn became trustee and financial agent of Illinois College. In this capacity he made one trip through the East in an effort to raise money. There he found the people more anxious to engage in the riotous land speculations of the period than to make outright gifts to an unknown college. Blackburn conceived a plan whereby these wealthy Easterners might appease their desire to speculate and at the same time serve the cause of education—not, however, to help Illinois College, but an institution which he would establish on non-sectarian lines after he had secured sufficient funds. His plan was to “enter and locate lands for capitalists upon a percentage basis.” Land was offered at one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre. Dr. Blackburn would select and enter the land in the name of those interested, for two dollars per acre. The seventy-five cents above the purchase price would be divided—twenty-five to Dr. Blackburn as commission, and the remaining fifty cents to purchase land with which a college would be endowed. His rather elaborate plan has been called a failure, but by it he entered more than 64,000 acres.⁵⁶ The land bought or entered with the commission money amounted to more than 16,000 acres. In May, 1837, he made a deed of trust to seven men who were charged with the “duty of procuring the incorporation of the institution.”⁵⁷

Dr. Blackburn did not live to see the fruits of his last labor materialize. During the winter of 1837-38 he fell on the ice and broke his hip. This rendered him bedfast until August 23, 1838, when this man, the “best backwoods orator,” personal friend of a great president, Indian fighter and Indian missionary, servant of the aristocratic church of Louisville, organizer of schools, teacher of theology, temperance lecturer, and college president, died at his home in Carlinville, Illinois, aged just four days short of sixty-six years.⁵⁷

Nearly twenty years later and after considerable litigation, with Abraham Lincoln as an opposing attorney in one case, Blackburn University was founded at Carlinville.⁵⁸ Afterwards, the name was changed to Blackburn College. At present, this memorial to the great man is one of the leading junior colleges under the control of the Presbyterian Church.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*