

“MISS POLLY” – A HISTORY OF MARY LUMPKIN BARNES 1811-1891

Mary Lumpkin Barnes is in some ways reminiscent of “our beloved Apphia,” the faithful Christian woman at Colossae, who is believed to have been the wife of Philemon, a wealthy slave holding disciple, and the mother of Archippus, a faithful minister of the gospel. Her home was one where Christians were welcome and where a faithful, itinerate evangelist could find a pleasant lodging place.

Thomas Lumpkin, father of Mary Lumpkin, was a prosperous South Carolina planter, who brought his family to Montgomery County, Alabama, in 1825. The Lumpkins came to this frontier state at a time when Indian towns flourished along the banks of the Alabama River, and a massive canebrake reportedly covered the great bend in the river between Montgomery and Prattville. Mary was fourteen when the family moved to the state. In 1830, at the age of 19, she married Elkanah Barnes, a successful planter and business man. This was thirty years before the War Between the States. Mary Lumpkin Barnes was a remarkable woman, but history has not been generous in preserving her life story.

In the Alabama State Archives there is a fine portrait of the pioneer preacher and educator, Alexander Graham, done by Nicola Marschall, the designer of the original Confederate flag and military uniform. A companion portrait of Graham’s wife is in the Thomas W. Phillips Memorial in Nashville. However, there is only one extant likeness, a time-worn photograph, of Mary Barnes, which has been reproduced in local historical quarterlies. It was probably made shortly before the war in her middle years. However, it is sufficient for us to know how she looked, and here and there we find events in her life that tell us how she lived.

In preparing this memorial of Mary Barnes, selections from a record of her life and times are included. The record is a series of essays about people and events that affected her life, or whose life was affected by her. Gathering this information is consistent with what William Frassanito said about Lincoln at Gettysburg. “History is a vast puzzle for which most of the pieces are missing.”¹ This is true of Mary Barnes. Yet, we hope to give enough “pieces of her life” for a word portrait of this exceptional pioneer Christian woman, known to contemporaries as “Miss Polly.”

Our purpose mainly is to tell about the early years of Mary Barnes, especially in the antebellum era of slave-manned plantations, when cotton was already reigning as king in the heart of Dixie. This corresponds with the beginning of Alabama statehood and the origin of the Restoration Movement in South Alabama. In both of these historic events, Mary Barnes was more than a casual observer.

Her husband, Elkanah Barnes, died in 1861 at the age of sixty-four. His death left Polly, at the age of fifty, the holder of 2,434.83 acres of rich black belt land in Montgomery and Lowndes Counties and one of the wealthiest women in the state. Yet, except for her illustrious son, Justus McDuffie Barnes, she would hardly be remembered today. On the other hand, apart from her righteous life, that son may not have become a great gospel preacher and educator.

The most trustworthy account of Mary Lumpkin's conversion is given by J. Waller Henry in "Sketches of Pioneer Times," published in 1906 in several issues of the *Alabama Christian*. Henry's history is substantiated by F.D. Srygley's "Life of J.M. Barnes," published in 1898. Both men obtained their information directly from J.M. Barnes. Henry says, "The first time [Barnes'] mother heard the plea for a 'thus saith the Lord,' she accepted it, and for years was the foremost defender of the truth in her section."² He further says she was baptized by William McGauhy, a young Georgia preacher, who held a protracted meeting at Fair Prospect in southwest Montgomery County in 1828.

At this time, McGauhy established a congregation of twelve members at Fair Prospect, of whom then seventeen year old Mary Lumpkin was the first. Fair Prospect was the earliest church of Christ in Montgomery County. It met in a building at that site for 42 years, until 1870 when the meetinghouse was partially destroyed in a fire caused by lightning. The church then moved to Strata, about two mile up the Rocky Mount Road (US 331), and met in a building of Strata Academy provided by the Barnes family. The building was given to the church after Barnes' school expanded and relocated at Highland Home.

William McGauhy was a twenty-three year-old preacher from North Central Georgia and alone, when he first preached at Fair Prospect in 1828. He was part of what Henry calls the "Southeastern movement," which began with a church made up of migrants from North Carolina that split off from the James O'Kelly reformation. In 1807, these former O'Kellyites established an independent church later known as Antioch and located near Skull Shoals in Clarke (now Oconee) County, Georgia.

In its advancement toward a more mature restoration of the ancient order, the Antioch church, whose influence had spread across Georgia as far west as DeKalb County, reorganized in 1822, near the time of William McGauhy's conversion. His 1830 obituary in the *Christian Messenger* said, "Elder McGaughy [sic] embraced the religion of Christ in his sixteenth year, and in his seventeenth year commenced proclaiming the glad tidings of great joy."³ He died July 19, 1830, three months before his twenty-sixth birthday.

In 1822, churches associated with the Southeastern movement renounced vestiges of the Methodist creed, which O'Kelly had clung to,

and called themselves "Bible Christians." Their influence spread from Georgia into East Alabama, into Russell, Chambers, and Macon Counties. Near this time they merged with the work of Cyrus White, a former Primitive Baptist, who established the Free Baptist movement (which became Free Will Baptists) in Georgia before adopting the restoration and established a New Testament church in Cleburne County, Alabama.

The Southeastern movement flourished for about thirty years. It preceded Stone and Campbell men in Montgomery County by several years. When men associated with Stone and Campbell entered this part of the state from West Alabama and Mississippi, it absorbed the Southeastern movement, which was soon forgotten. The movement is identified as such only by Henry. Other historians tend to ignore it completely and identify it as part of the Stone movement; but it was not!

Henry says: "In 1841 a great union meeting was brought about by the efforts of Wm. C. Kirkpatrick [Henry's great uncle]...and was held under an arbor on the hill near Pigeon Creek in Butler County, by the side of the old Merryweather [sic] trail."⁴ The participants in this union meeting shows that men associated with the Southeastern movement met with men associated with the Stone and Campbell movement, and seeing that they were teaching substantially the same thing, affected a union. "The leaven of union in this great meeting gave the cause new impetus and there were many additions."⁵

Both the conversion of Mary Lumpkin and the establishment of the first church of Christ in Montgomery County came from the short-lived Southeastern movement, which had been active in Georgia for twenty years before its most prominent preachers (James Buys, Arthur Dupree, Isham Hicks, William McGauhy, and others) became familiar with the writings of Barton W. Stone in the *Christian Messenger*. The Southeastern movement actually began nearly twenty years before Stone started publishing the *Messenger* through which his influence came into that movement, and four years after Antioch church was reorganized in 1822.

As for Mary Lumpkin, she knew from her own study of the Bible that she should be baptized to please God, before she first heard McGauhy at Fair Prospect. Earlier she had asked a Presbyterian preacher to baptize her, but he refused saying she had already been baptized as a baby. It must have been a joy without measure when this seventeen year old bonnie lass first heard McGauhy preach at Fair Prospect the very things she had read in her Bible. It's no wonder she was baptized the first time she heard "the plea for a 'thus saith the Lord'" and became the first person in Montgomery County known to be baptized by a Restoration preacher, and the first of the member of Fair Prospect church.

Mary Lumpkin married Elkanah Barnes about three years after her baptism and faithfully brought up her children in the way of truth. One

of the greatest joys as a Christian was to see her son become a Christian and then begin to preach the gospel she loved so dearly. Her joy in his ministry continued as long as she lived. Srygley wrote:

He never made a sacrifice or endured a hardship for the love of truth as a preacher while his mother lived that she did not stand bravely by him with gentle, loving words of praise, comfort, and encouragement. When he would come home after weeks of hard work on preaching tours, she always listened with interest to his story of the hard battles he had fought, rejoiced with him over every victory he had won, and keenly sympathized with him in every persecution he endured. ⁶

It was thirteen years after the beginning of Fair Prospect church when Dr. William H. Hooker from Tennessee preached there, but the people were skeptical of his message. That is, until Mary Barnes, through the respect she had gained in that country as knowledgeable in the Bible, endorsed him. Durden Stough said, "She realized from [Hooker's] first sermon, he was preaching the truth, the very things she knew the Bible taught, the same message she had heard years before from the lips of William McGauhy."⁷ As a result of her endorsement of Hooker's message sixty souls were baptized.

Thirty-one of Mary Barnes eighty years were spent as the faithful companion of her entrepreneurial husband, Elkanah Barnes, who came to Alabama the year before Alabama statehood. He was twenty-one, single, and accompanied by Thomas Butler, the husband of his oldest sister. Butler bought land and built a home and gristmill on Pintala Creek five miles north of Crenshaw County. Elkanah also obtained land and built a log cabin for his recently widowed mother, Anne, three miles south of Butler's mill. This was four years after the Treaty of Fort Jackson that opened fertile Alabama land for settlement and gave thousands of Carolinians a disease called "Alabama fever."

Elkanah Barnes remained unmarried twelve years after coming to Alabama. He felt obligated to help his mother care for her six minor children, ages four to seventeen. It was not until all but one of these had married and went out on their own that he decided to build a log cabin near his mother's home and start a family of his own. He didn't have to go far to find a suitable wife, and on June 24, 1830, at the age of thirty-three, he married nineteen year old Mary Lumpkin at what Srygley called "the old Lumpkin place" near Rocky Mount Road.

In 1825, seven years after the Barnes settled in Pintlala Valley, Thomas Lumpkin bought a tract of land between sites later known as Sellers and Strata, and cleared land along Lumpkin Creek for a plantation. He owed eight slaves at the time. It is said that, "He was a well-educated man, a practical and prosperous farmer, a man of great influence and active in public matters."⁸ Lumpkin was English and his wife, Jane McIlwaine, was of Scotch descent.

Mary Lumpkin was born January 24, 1811 in Lancaster County, South Carolina, the oldest of the Lumpkin's three daughters. She had an older brother but neither his name nor age are known. The close proximity of Anne Barnes' home to Lumpkin Hill provided the environment in which Elly and Polly found mutual attraction that led to marriage, in spite of their age difference. Mary was fourteen years younger than her husband. Elkanah was already an efficacious man when he married. In addition to being a prosperous planter, he was co-owner of a mercantile business with his brother-in-law and worked as a surveyor, land agent, and building contractor. He built the first mill and the first two court houses in Lowndes County, as well as some fine homes in Montgomery County.

Barnes was also active in the militia that drilled near Butler's mill. In 1825, his unit met and escorted Gen. Lafayette to Montgomery when the Marquis visited Alabama during his sixteen month tour of the nation. Elkanah's life often brushed with history. His first home in Pintlala Valley was twenty miles from where Hernando Desoto passed the mouth of Pintlala Creek in 1540. He, in truth, was a substantial civic-minded citizen who helped rock the cradled of Montgomery County.

Much could be profitably said about Elkanah Barnes. Lee Barnes has written extensively of his noted ancestor.

He was a man of his time, living in his times, a man who lived his first years in Montgomery County in a log cabin and who died owning large tracts of land and having investment in myriad enterprises. He was not a powerful politician, nor a millionaire's son, nor a war hero. He was a common man with above-average ambitions and energy, and what he accomplished in his lifetime would affect generations of 'common folk' in Montgomery County.⁹

Elly Barnes may very well have been "a common man," but without question, he found for a wife a most uncommon woman. Her interest in the Bible began in her tender teenage years. She was well-educated, intelligent, and possessed an abundance of exceptional and practical wisdom. From her study of God's word, she developed into what even secular historians have called an "ardent church woman" acknowledged "to be one of the best biblical scholars of her day."

For seventeen years Elly and Polly lived in a log cabin near his mother's home, where he operated what the family called "a farm in the woods." However, in 1847, they moved into a large plantation style house with white columns, spacious grounds, and ubiquitous servant quarters. He owned thirty-one slaves at the time. This plantation house near Rocky Mount Road is the place where a settlement sprang up which Mary inadvertently named Strata. She intended to name the place Strabo, after the ancient Greek geographer, philosopher, and historian. But her handwriting did not equal her knowledge of Greek history and the postal

authorities in Washington City took her to mean Strata and the post office was so named in 1849 with Elly as its first post master.

Mary's grandson, E.R. Barnes, described her homemaking in their cabin in the woods and later in their plantation home at Strata.

Busy though she was as a conscientious house keeper and as a faithful copartner of a busy man, she found time to brighten her cabin home. And when she became mistress of a really comfortable and roomy house, she made it so inviting and its spirit so hospitable that cultured people were glad to visit in it. She let into her rural home light from the outside world by providing periodicals and books. She lighted it from within by her own genius at inspiring and instructing her household. Her home reflected her own nobility of thought and appreciation of culture and progress. Its greatest blessing was the vigorous and uniquely interesting personality of its mistress. Mrs. Barnes' word carried the force almost of an oracle when her neighbors sought counsel and comfort. She was pious and abounding in faith in the promise of God. She was frank and she loved truth.¹⁰

In their plantation home, Elly and Polly entertained preachers and politicians. Outstanding men that grace the pages of Alabama history were hosted by them: William Lowndes Yancey, Thomas J. Judge, Thomas H. Watts, David Clopton, and others. Yancey, as a congressman, was recognized as one of the nation's greatest orators at a time when the national capitol resounded with the resonant voices of such men as Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun. Watts was a governor during the War Between the States. Judge and Clopton served the state as congressmen.

Another well-known Alabamian that visited the Barnes' home was Judge Benajah Bibb, brother of the state's first two governors. The judge was a Methodist, whom Mary Barnes, on one occasion when Bibb was her guest, undertook to show him the error of his sectarian religion. Bibb made an effort to quote a passage in defense of his faith, but he erred both in a garbled quotation and a misapplication of it. In her gentle but candid manner, Miss Polly, replied, "Ah, Judge, I see you know more about politics than about the word of God."¹¹ Bibb took the rejoinder with grace, and in later years often told in good humor about the time when Mrs. Elkanah Barnes got the best of him in a religious argument.

Srygley related incidents that give insight to "Mack" Barnes' life growing up on a prewar South Alabama plantation. His parents provided him with a slave boy named Ben, a little older than him, to be his companion. Srygley related an event that sprang from the unconcealed contempt that slaves generally held for poverty stricken white folks, called "poor whites," or more derisively "white trash."

A very poor man lived near the Barnes' plantation, and three boys of the family rode one shabby old horse with a blaze on his face to school without a saddle. [As they passed by] Ben laughed at the three boys on

one old, poor horse without a saddle, and little Barnes joined him in the fun. When Father Barnes came home at night, some one told him Ben and little Barnes had made fun of the poor boys. Father Barnes promptly gave them both a severe thrashing with the same cowhide, which taught little Barnes a lesson he never forgot."¹²

Mary Barnes shared her husband's feelings toward under privileged people, including her husband's slaves. She quickly corrected her son when he showed offensive behavior toward such deprived people. Elkanah's blacksmith was married to a free woman that did not live on the plantation but often visited. However, her visits so interfered with plantation work that Elkanah ordered her to keep off the premises.

One day she came to visit while Elkanah was away and little ten year old "Mack" Barnes took it upon himself to order the woman to leave. His pompous assumption of authority naturally wounded the poor woman deeply. Her feelings were so grievously hurt that she wept freely in anguished humiliation as she departed.

At the time, some friends of Mary's son had come to spend the night, but she was sad with a troubled countenance. The boy knew something was wrong. His mother usually took great interest in the play when he had visitors. He asked her what the matter was, but she told him to go on and play with his friends. She would tell him when he was alone. He tried to do as she said, but his sensitive heart could not bear the suspense. He returned in a burst of sobs, threw himself into her lap with his arms around her neck, and begged her to tell him what troubled her.

She then told him she was troubled and sad because he had behaved badly by insulting a poor woman in ordering her off the place. He defensively told her his father didn't want the woman there and since he was not present he told her to leave. His mother told him that was not the business of a little boy and that he should let his father handle such matters. Perhaps his mother's displeasure with him distressed him as severely as his father's use of cowhide, and that became another lesson of the sort that helped to shape his life.

When "Mack" Barnes at seventeen left home for Bethany College to study under Alexander Campbell, his mother gave him a sheet of paper on which she had written words of counsel and encouragement. "Her heart was heavy with sorrow to see him go, and her tears fell fast on the paper as she handed it to him. He [later] tacked the paper to the lid of his trunk, where it remained till it was destroyed by the fire which burned his home in 1883."¹³ But he recalled some of the words. "Be your own self; never effect to be what you are not. Be kind and courteous to every one. Be polite and respectful to those older than yourself. Treat others as you would have them treat you. Trust God and serve him, and he will take care of you."¹⁴

These words, though brief and simple, are profoundly perceptive. They reflect the life of his mother and summarize the character she instilled in him. If she had done no more for the cause of Christ in Alabama than to give her son to his service, she would be worth remembering. H. Leo Boles spoke highly of J.M. Barnes. Among other things he wrote, "Perhaps no man in the church of our Lord has touched the hearts of so many in Alabama as did Brother Barnes....He established hundreds of congregations and strengthened many others."¹⁵

When Barnes returned from Bethany, he was uncertain what to do. He tentatively thought of farming, but his father, ever wise to the needs of the community, said they needed a school and encouraged him to teach. Clyde Fulmer said,

After earnest family conferences, which recognized the community need for a school, Elkanah Barnes decided to build one. He built with his own funds, on his own land, a commodious frame school building, in which his son operated his own school....It was a private school, financed by the Barnes family, and by only small fees. None was turned down who could not afford to attend and all young men who planned to be preachers of the gospel attended free. The purpose was to teach academic courses and the Bible was emphasized as God's truth."¹⁶

It is most likely that "Mack" Barnes' parents' regard for the under privileged, which they instilled in him early in life, had an effect on the manner in which he ran his school. Those three poor boys that rode to school on a decrepit old nag without a saddle was burned into his conscience by a piece of cowhide wielded by his father, and by his mother's stern disapproval of his mistreatment of a poor black woman, most likely played a part in his educating Alabama boys and girls largely at his own expense. Mary also taught the gospel to her husband's slaves and was responsible for the first black congregation of Christians in Montgomery County. Its meeting house at Strata was built of lumber salvaged from the remains of the old Fair Prospect church building.

According to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, Dan Vickers, a black tenant on the Barnes farm, said, "When the Creator got ready to make Mr. Mack Barnes, he done the job himself; he didn't leave it to no clerk" (Adapted).¹⁷ God may not have left the work to a clerk, but he put "Mack" Barnes in the hands of one of the most noble of women who left the stamp of her faithful Christian life on his character. The *Advertiser* also said of Barnes, "He lived a full life, and in his later years he was a man after the order of the Biblical patriarchs."

Boles said, "May we not forget the great work ["Mack" Barnes] did and the consecrated life that he lived."¹⁸ To this we would add: And let us not forget that little pioneer woman who gave him birth and ably molded him in the paths of righteousness that led him to the great work he did for the cause of Christ. It has been observed that the strong strain of

Biblical conservatism that yet prevails among many New Testament Christians in Alabama is due in a large measure to the exceptional influence of this faithful preacher.

Perhaps if we had all the pieces of Mary Barnes life in hand, we might see that she had a larger part in molding her son's strict devotion to the word of God than the great Sage of Bethany under whom he studied. He wrote a regular column in the *Gospel Advocate* under the title, "The Little Man." He may well have been little in stature, but thanks in a great measure to his little mother, he was a giant in the faith.

We close this historical memorial of "Miss Polly" with the personal conviction that she is the most remarkable and influential Christian woman in the history of churches of Christ in Alabama, and that she gave to the church and state, in the person of Justus MacDuffie Barnes, probably the greatest gospel preacher in the state's 200 year history.

"A worthy woman who can find? For her price is far above rubies."¹⁹

Earl Kimbrough. Brandon, Florida
 Friends of the Restoration Lecture
 Faulkner University
 Montgomery, Alabama
 March 2014

¹ *Smithsonian*, October 2013, 57.

² *Alabama Christian*, February 1906, 1.

³ *Christian Messenger*, November 1830, 262.

⁴ *Alabama Christian*, March 1906, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁶ F.D. Srygley, *Biographies and Sermons*, 399.

⁷ Durden Stough, *Catoma Street Church of Christ*, 7-8.

⁸ *Memorial Record of Alabama*, Vol. 1, 767-768.

⁹ *Montgomery Genealogical Society Quarterly*, Spring 1994, 44.

¹⁰ *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 9, 1936.

¹¹ Srygley, *Biographies*, 399, 400.

¹² *Ibid.*, 400.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 399.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ H. Leo Boles, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers*, 276-279.

¹⁶ *Alabama Restoration Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p.16. (Copied for the *Gospel Advocate*.)

¹⁷ Boles, *Biographies*, 280.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Proverbs 31:10, American Standard Version.