

Coffey
Family

Reverend Reuben A. Coffey

Preacher and Pioneer

From North Carolina and Indiana

by Janet Vos Amtower

Part I OCGS REFERENCE ONLY

Reverend Reuben Coffey was a man who gained the admiration and respect of many parishioners in Wilkes, Burke, and adjoining counties in North Carolina and in Owen and surrounding counties in Indiana. Reuben was born on September 15, 1785 just nine years after the American Declaration of Independence and four years before George Washington would become the first President of the young country. He was born on his father's plantation in the area of North Carolina which is situated between the beautiful blue Ridge Mountains with peaks rising 4500 feet above sea level on its northwest side and the Brushy Mountains on its south. Protected from the winter cold by the mountains and with rich fertile soil, Wilkes County was an ideal place for a farmer. Indeed "there (was) not a section in the world of equal area that (surpassed) Wilkes County in agricultural possibilities."

It was in this idyllic setting with its breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains where Reuben lived with his father Thomas, mother Sarah, and his fourteen brothers and sisters.

After the death of his first wife, Thomas Coffey had remarried and moved Sarah and his six children from Virginia to North Carolina sometime between the years 1775 and 1780. They had settled on the "upper waters" of the Yadkin River in Wilkes County where they started what would become a large plantation and added more children to their family, one of whom was Reuben.

Thomas Coffey and his family were "prominent members of the Yadkin Grove Baptist Church" which stood on the grounds of the Coffey Plantation, a farm that included land from "just below the church (and extended) for about three miles up the river."

Reuben helped his father on the farm and "early in life learned the blacksmith trade," a craft that he perfected as a result of dedication and practice until he had become "highly skilled" and could "with the primitive machinery of his time make a Dechard rifle, working the barrel with wooden equipment" He grew into a fine, strong young man who loved the Lord and had no fear of hard work, but he received very little, if any, formal education as there were no public schools in the area until 1839 and "in the early history of the county the opportunity of obtaining an education was scant. There were only two or more private schools, with school houses made of logs, sticks and mud scattered about over the county."

In 1805, at the age of twenty, Reuben Coffey married Polly Dowell (whose brother, Rev. James Dowell, was married to Martha Coffey, Reuben's older sister). Reuben built a house for Polly on her father's property—the "Old Dowell Place." This would not be the only house that Reuben would build for his wife during the years to come, but it was their first home together and the place where eight of their children would be born. They lived on the "Old Dowell Place" for twenty years until after both Thomas and Sarah had died at which time Reuben moved his family back to his boyhood home on the Yadkin River.

Having been brought up in a Christian home and attending church on the grounds of his father's plantation, and possibly having been influenced by his brother-in-law, Reverend James Dowell, Reuben soon discovered that he had a calling to share his religious convictions; and early in the year 1813 he petitioned the Yadkin Grove Baptist Church for permission to speak in public. His request was granted and it wasn't long until it became apparent that Reuben Coffey was a gifted preacher; and the Church soon "granted Brother Reuben Coffey the further privilege of holding meetings in any place where God in turn of His providence shall direct him." Reuben quickly became highly regarded, not only as a preacher, but as a person who could resolve conflicts; and frequently the Yadkin Baptist Church received requests for him to 'attend and labor' among congregations near and far from Wilkes County.

Reuben was good with people, he had been blessed with a gift for public speaking, and despite the fact that he had not received a formal public school education, he had learned the Bible. And so the obvious next step came in 1815 when this descendant of Irish immigrants and plantation owners was ordained as a Baptist minister and became "pastor of the Globe Mountain Church and many surrounding churches of Wilkes and Burke Counties, North Carolina." Reuben Coffey was a man devoted to his family, his faith in God and his ministry. His missionary work and ministry to many churches in North Carolina and Indiana, and his help in founding a Baptist college in Franklin, Indiana were to become his legacy.



Newell Sanders, grandson of Reuben and Polly Coffey, sent this picture of the Baptist Church on the Yadkin and others to his Uncle Shelton Coffey in a letter dated April 25, 1896. He had just returned from a trip to North Carolina where he visited places of his mother's childhood. Newell's mother, Miriam, and Shelton were sister and brother. In 1931 Newell Sanders published the book *Thomas Coffey and His Descendants* which was written by his cousin Laurence H. Coffey.

“Extracts From Minutes of the Yadkin Grove Baptist Church”

- Third Saturday in July, 1812: Church transacted business and also the church rested on the succeeding day and received **Reuben Coffey** by experience.
- On third Saturday, August, 1812, **Reuben Coffey** was appointed church clerk, and Smith Coffey and Polly Coffey were received by experience.
- Third Saturday in January, 1813: **Brother Reuben Coffey** applied to the church for liberty to speak in public, and to appoint meetings for that purpose. The church gave him liberty as far as respects the bounds of this church.
- Third Saturday in May 1813: Church seated and granted **Brother Reuben Coffey** the further privilege of holding meetings in any place where God in a turn of His providence shall direct him
- Church seated on third Saturday in March, 1814: took into consideration the reference of last meeting concerning the gift of **Brother Reuben Coffey**, and after discoursing on the subject, agreed to petition three churches to send us their ablest ministerial helps for ordination the third Saturday in May next; viz: Smyrna Church, Sandy Run Church, Little River Church, and ordered the clerk to write letters to the churches.
- Third Saturday, October, 1814: The church agreed that the clerk prepare a few lines for **Brother Reuben Coffey** certifying his authority to preach the Gospel, if called for.
- Third Saturday in February, 1815: Church received Brother John Barlow and William Dotson as presbytery who proceeded to the work and after examination found **Brother Reuben Coffey** in the work of the ministry and ordained him to that office.
- Third Saturday in November 1818: A report brought forward from the Smoky Church for **Brother Reuben Coffey** to attend them, which request was granted by the church.
- Third Saturday in December, 1818: Smyrna Church on Upper Creek requested that **Brother Reuben Coffey** be allowed to attend their church as often as opportunity will admit, which privilege was granted; also request was brought to the church from Globe Church for **Brother Reuben Coffey** to labor among them, which was granted.
- Church seated Saturday before third Sunday, April 1821: Request before the church to meet together at **Brother Reuben Coffey's** to try to settle a matter of grief between two sisters, to wit: Chaney Stipp and Betsy Garner on the third Saturday in May; also that **Brother Reuben Coffey** and **William Coffey** be appointed to search into the grounds of the dispute, which was granted; also contributed to expenses of ministry to **Brother Reuben Coffey**, \$3.50.
- Saturday before third Sunday, September, 1832: letters of dismissal granted to **Brother Reuben Coffey** and his wife; also from **Brother George Dowell** and wife; also from **Brother James Dowell** and wife (**Martha Coffey Dowell**).



NOTES:

Coffey Family Descendants - <http://www.fmoran.com/coffey13.html>

“Indeed there (was) not a section....” <http://www.ls.net/~newriver/nc/crouch.htm>
Historical Sketches of Wilkes County Published by John Crouch, 1902; pg.37

“They settled on the upper waters of the Yadkin River.....” *Thomas Coffey and His Descendants*, pg.80

“Thomas Coffey and his family were prominent members of the Yadkin Grove Baptist Church....” “Just below the church for about three miles up the river.” *Thomas Coffey and His Descendants*, pg.80

"early in life learned the blacksmith trade...." *Thomas Coffey and His Descendants*, pg.101

"in the early history of the county the opportunity...." *Historical Sketches of Wilkes County*, pg.20

"In 1805, at the age of twenty...." *Thomas Coffey and His Descendants*, pg.99

"pastor of the Globe Mountain Church and many surrounding churches...." <http://www.fmoran.com/coffey13.html>

"*Extracts From Minutes of the Yadkin Grove Baptist Church*" *Thomas Coffey and His Descendants*, pgs.96-98

During the time that Reuben was pastor of the Globe Mountain Church in Wilkes County, Jesse and Jonathon Boone, nephews of the legendary frontiersman, Daniel Boone, were members of the Three Forks Baptist Church in nearby Watauga County, North Carolina. Jesse and Jonathon's Uncle Daniel was a religious man who surely would have approved of their affiliation with the church.

coming in the next issue:

Read more about the Boone family and their connections with the Coffey family

The McDonald Sisters

photo shared by Donna Stogsdill, great-great-granddaughter of Martha McDonald Dowden



Seated, left to right: Harriet Coffey, Eliza Cooper, and Charity Coffey. Standing: Elizabeth "Betty" Cooper, Matilda "Tilly" Dowden, and Martha Dowden.

Their married names reflecting early Clay Township settlers' names, these sisters illustrate the very common practice of siblings marrying into neighboring families. Harriet married Wiley H. Coffey June 19, 1849. The sisters' mother, Ruth, made her home with them in her later years, dying at age 77. Eliza married William H. Reeves September 11, 1834. Charity married Joel A. Coffey December 12, 1847. Elizabeth married John J. Cooper October 10, 1839. Matilda married Zepheniah Dowden July 25, 1844. And Martha married William H. Dowden September 21, 1845.

NEWS FROM 1874

obituaries transcribed from rare old newspapers

Letter from Lancaster

We pick up the pen to note the death of **Leah Lautenschlager**, the wife of the Rev. John F. Lautenschlager. On the 13th last, her spirit bade adieu to terrestrial scenes and timely cares, and winged its way to celestial glory and eternal light. Her home of mortality has been changed to the saint's rest in the haven of eternal blessedness. Instead of singing the words of poets, she harps the songs of angels around God's throne. Her funeral and burial took place the 15th inst. It was an imposing one, her husband's congregation were joined by her numerous friends who wept the loss of one so dear. The deceased sister was born in Guilford county North Carolina. Her parents, George and Sarah Coble emigrated to Marion county Indiana, when Leah was three years old. She was united in holy wedlock to Rev. J. F. Lautenschlager on the 9th of December, 1847. This union was blessed with twelve children, accompanied with peace and domestic happiness. Two of these children have gone before their mother, while the remaining ten — five boys and five girls — with their loved father to mourn her departure; but their sorrow is not as those "who have no hope." From her life and character we can say in the language of revelation: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth; Yea, saith the spirit that they may rest from their labors, and their works do follow them."

Owen County Journal Apr. 23, 1874

The funeral sermon of **Mrs. George R. Milam**, who died in Spencer, September 21st 1873, was preached on Sabbath last, April 12th at Headings Chapel, by Rev. Dr. Rollins. The subject of the discourse was selected by the deceased, during her lifetime, from 1st Thessalonians, 16, 17, and 18th verses. Thy Hymn No. 191, M. E. Hymns, was also selected by deceased. The sermon is spoken of as a masterly effort by the large concourse of people who assembled to pay the last tribute of respect to this most estimable lady, who, during life, was beloved by all.

Owen County Journal April 16, 1874

Johnny Hight, son of Elder Hight of the Christian Church, died very suddenly on Saturday 31st ult., in the ninth year of his age. Nearly one year ago, he had a severe attack of spotted fever, from the effects of which he never fully recovered although it was thought he was slowly regaining his health up to the day of his death. On Saturday he was taken with a spasm and died in a short time. He was buried on Monday, and was followed to the grave by a large concourse of citizens and the children from the schools. Elder Treat conducted the funeral ceremonies. The bereaved family have the sympathy of the entire community in their great affliction

Owen County Journal February 6, 1874

We take up the pen to record the death of our worthy Bro. **John Bowen**, secretary of Olive Branch Grange, Jefferson township, after a week's illness. On the morning of the

24th inst. his spirit bade adieu to terrestrial scenes and took its flight to the celestial home of the just. He leaves a wife and seven children to mourn his death and to battle with t h e cares and sorrows of this life.

In accordance with the custom of our Order and the wish of his friends, the funeral ceremony was conducted by the Patrons of Husbandry.

On Saturday, the 25th inst., at 9 o'clock A.M. the officers and members of his grange, also a large number of the membership of Arney, Oak Grove, Pleasant Hill, White River, and Sugar Grove Granges met at his late residence, west of Freedom, and proceeded to carry out the burial services. We proceeded within a half mile of Bethel (the burying ground), where all were halted and the grand procession formed on foot and marched to the grave, Bro. T. G. Price acting master, Bro. Andrew Jackson chaplain, Bro. Samuel Denney marshal, Bro. E. H. Duling leader of the choir.

After the relatives and friends of the deceased had their last sad look, as the choir sang "The beautiful shore," the brothers and sisters of the Order marched around the grave and deposited their bouquets — emblems of everlasting life — at the close of which Bro. Price took up a handful of earth, sprinkled it in the grave, and, in the name of Olive Branch Grange, pronounced the words. "Bro. Bowen, farewell."

In addition to the Patrons present, there were hundreds of others to witness the solemn ceremonies.

Owen County Journal April 30, 1874

The first tavern in Owen County was operated in Spencer by Philip Hedges. He built Spencer's first hotel, a log structure on the southeast corner of the courthouse square in 1822.

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Part III

In the early 1800s "he had traveled a hundred miles on horseback to Indianapolis, the new capital of Indiana and associated with other Baptists," and had also attended the 1833 meeting of the newly formed "General Association of Baptists" which was held in Franklin, Indiana during which an urgent need for an "educated clergy" was a major topic of concern. The creation of Franklin College was agreed upon at this gathering. The school was chartered in 1834 and it opened in 1837 under the name "*The Indiana Baptist Manual Labor Institute.*"

Reuben Coffey gave generously to the school which he had helped found "sometimes to his own financial distress. He met one of the payments on his subscription to the college by sacrificing a fine yoke of oxen...for twelve dollars."

"Although lacking in educational preparation himself, Reuben Coffey was a loyal supporter of the school and stood almost alone in his advocacy of missionary projects in the inhospitable area of the White River Valley. He received a missionary appointment to Bloomington in 1836-37."

As a missionary in these remote areas of Indiana he often served not only as a preacher but as a physician as well since doctors were few and far between in the early and mid 1800s. "He owned a large book by a Doctor Thompson which contained general treatments for most complaints. The prescription he used most was *Number Six* which for a generation was carried in stores."

In 1842 The Indiana Baptist Manual Labor Institute made history when it became the first college in the state of Indiana to admit women; and it had grown so rapidly that by the year 1843, just six years since it had opened, it became clear that a larger building was needed. The new structure (which is now incorporated into the north part of the main building) contained classrooms, a chapel, dormitories, a bell tower; and there was a well nearby which supplied water for the three-story building. The new building was completed in 1844 at a cost of \$5,800 and it was at this time that the Indiana Baptist Manual Labor Institute's name was changed to Franklin College.

In the early days of the college tuition was twenty one dollars a year and room and board in the brand new dormitories was ten dollars a year with "the school furnishing the stove, bedstead, table, chairs and fuel." In 1847 the first student to graduate received a diploma hand written in Latin.

Reuben was fortunate to live long enough to see the school that he had helped start grow into a college that had a new building with additions that made it the rival of any in the state of Indiana.

When Reuben Coffey passed away in February of 1854 at the age of 69 after a life devoted to God and his family, he had accomplished many things. He had been a husband, father, carpenter, blacksmith, gunsmith, farmer, mechanic, minister, missionary, inventor and advocate for higher education.

The following resolution from the Bethel Church speaks to the respect that he had earned during his life's work as a missionary and caring pastor to the many Baptists whose lives he touched.

"Resolutions on the Death of Reuben Coffey
by the Bethel Baptist Church, April 15, 1854
Sacred to the memory of our Pastor

Whereas, it hath pleased the Almighty in His Sovereign power to remove from us by death our beloved yet much lamented pastor, Elder Reuben Coffey.

Therefore, be it resolved, that in his death we acknowledge the hand of the Lord, yet without murmuring, though we feel it to be a most sore bereavement.

Resolved, that in his death; the community has lost one of its best citizens and this Church a very influential preacher.

Resolved, that as a man he was much esteemed, as a minister he was faithful and orthodox, never willing to compromise with error, but was firm and unwavering in exhibiting the true doctrine of the Bible, He was some forty years in preaching the Gospel of Christ, was called to the pastoral care of Bethel Church in 1836, which he served with much faithfulness and self-denial about eighteen years.

Resolved, that he was instrumental in diffusing benevolent principles where he labored for, in principle, he was one

of the first missionaries of Indiana, carrying out his missionary doctrines by sacrificing much of his time in preaching for other churches and destitute place.

Resolved, that we sympathize with his bereaved family and especially his aged widow who, through his forty years of labor, has been his universal assistant in toil.

Resolved, that he lived esteemed, not only by the church with which he united but throughout the denomination, and will be lamented by the same.

Polly Dowell Coffey, the woman who had been by Reuben's side for almost fifty years helping him on the farm and with his ministry lived for thirteen years after her beloved husband died. Reuben and Polly's daughter Miriam who was a widow had moved into her parents' home with her young son Newell in 1852. When Reuben Coffey died in 1854 the two widows ran the farm and raised Miriam's toddler.

When Polly Dowell Coffey died on February 11, 1867 at the age of 79 it was in the middle of a harsh Indiana winter. "The roads were impassable and the men had to lay down the fences and go through the farms to the graveyard for the burial." Polly was buried next to her husband in the Coffey Cemetery near the Bethel Church where Reuben had been pastor for eighteen years.



Polly Dowell Coffey

Children of Rev. Reuben A. Coffey and Polly Dowell

Alfred Martin Coffey married Jane Coffey
 Albert Coffey (abt. 1810) married Sarah Goodnight
 Cornelius Coffey (abt. 1812) married Margaret Smith
 Emily Coffey (abt. 1814) married William I. Curtis
 Melena Coffey (abt. 1816) married Wilson Coffey
 Luther Coffey (abt 1818) married Myra Crisp
 Rufus Coffey (abt. 1820) married Charlotte Allen
 Miriam Coffey (abt. 1822) married 1st. John Sanders; 2nd J.H. Buchanan
 Shelton Coffey (b. 1 Feb. 1826) married 23 Oct. 1845 Dicy Sanders (b. 25 Dec. 1824)
 Judson Coffey (abt. 1830) married Carolina Rone

NOTES:

"Reuben Coffey gave generously to the school he had helped found..." *Newell Sanders-A Biography*; pg. 11

"although lacking in educational preparation himself..." *The Centennial History of Franklin College* by John F. Cady, Ph.D., 1934; pg. 19

"As a missionary in these remote areas of Indiana he often served not only as a preacher but as a physician as well..." *Newell Sanders-A Biography*; pg. 11

"The college had grown so rapidly..." *Alma Mater*, Vol. VII, Dec. 1932, Number 2

"Tuition was twenty one dollars a year"....."the school furnishing the stove, bedstead..." *The Centennial History of Franklin College*, pg. 53

"In 1847 the first student to graduate..." *The Centennial History of Franklin College*, pg. 55

"Resolutions on the death of Reuben Coffey..." *Thomas Coffey and His Descendants*; pg. 100-101

"Reuben and Polly's daughter Miriam... When Polly Dowell Coffey died on February..." *Newell Sanders-A Biography*; pg. 13