

Conversion Narratives ^[1]

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by Jay Mazzocchi, 2006

From colonial times, many North Carolinians have felt compelled to record the events and emotions surrounding their religious journeys. Most conversion narratives, autobiographical accounts of often powerful spiritual transformations, follow a pattern that traces an individual's experiences through three distinct phases: a previous, often wayward, life; a highly emotional and dramatic conversion; and a reoriented life in the "new light" of faith. Authors may have various reasons for writing down their experiences-to evangelize, to pass on their faith to their children, or to help others understand their own problems and find spiritual solutions-but all desire somehow to publicize a personal crisis that they consider to be the most important point of their lives.

While spiritual conversion is not the possession of any one religion, most North Carolina conversion narratives describe transformations that have taken place within the context of the Christian ^[2] faith. Herbert Northup, a student at the Greensboro Bible Training School, writes in an undated narrative that he is publishing his experiences "in order that it may help somebody else." Northup describes his life before his conversion as one of tough jobs, constant chewing tobacco use, drunkenness, and jail time. In 1905, after living through the deaths of several friends and acquaintances and feeling as if "God was after me all the time," he went to a mission in Newport, R.I., and "was saved." From that day forward, Northup devoted his life to helping others with similar problems, moving to North Carolina to study the Bible and continue his ministry.

In *A Narrative of a Most Extraordinary Work of Religion* (1802) ^[3], James Hall ^[4] of Cabarrus County ^[5] describes how an undesired visit to a Christian revival led to his surprising religious awakening. After admitting his cynicism about the event, Hall, "struck in the forehead, as if by the end of a person's finger," felt the Holy Spirit descend on him and set his emotions ablaze. "Oh God," he writes, "I am afraid of high professions, but am constrained to acknowledge, from my present feelings, that if the world in all its glory was in my offer I would not receive it as an inducement to exchange my present state for that in which I was yesterday."

Blum H. Vestal ^[6], a North Carolinian writing in the early twentieth century, described his life before his conversion as one of poverty and ignorance. After many failed attempts at reform, he visited a church where he listened to young children reading aloud. He began to "hunger to read" himself: "I went to the woods and sat down on a log and began to cry and talk to the Lord the best I knew how. . . . I told him I wanted to read like those little children, and the Lord promised me there that I would live to read and also preach the Word and I have never doubted the call from that moment."

Vestal stayed with the congregation he had visited, attending "church and Sabbath-school for something near twelve months." After hearing a sermon on the "New Birth" and what it was to be "born again," he "went forward, knelt at the altar, made a full confession, accepted Christ in the presence of the people and told them that I was going to live for the Lord." His narrative, titled *From the Saloon to the Pulpit: The Life of Blum H. Vestal* (1911) ^[7], goes on to describe the many good works Vestal subsequently performed and how his understanding of God and of himself increased during the years following his conversion.

Reference:

James Craig Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America* (1992).

Additional Resources:

Vestal, Blum H. 1900. *From the saloon to the pulpit; or, The life of Blum H. Vestal* Greensboro, N.C.: Apostolic Messenger Pub. Co. <https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/38232673> ^[6]

Subjects:

Literature ^[8]

Religion ^[9]

Writers, journalists, and editors ^[10]

Authors:

Mazzocchi, Jay ^[11]

From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press. ^[12]

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LINKS

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/conversion-narratives> [2] <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Christianity.html> [3] <https://www.worldcat.org/title/narrative-of-a-most-extraordinary-work-of-religion-in-north-carolina/oclc/40010933> [4] <https://ncpedia.org/biography/hall-james> [5] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/cabarrus> [6] <https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/38232673> [7] http://books.google.com/books/about/From_the_Saloon_to_the_Pulpit_Or_The_Lif.html?id=JGZxkgAACAAJ [8] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/literature> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/religion> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/writer> [11] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/mazzocchi-jay> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->