

Purefoy, James Simpson ^[1]

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by R. Hargus Taylor, 1994

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James Simpson Purefoy, merchant and Baptist ^[2] clergyman, was the youngest of three sons of the Reverend John and Mary Fort Purefoy near Forestville, Wake County ^[3]. His paternal great-grandfather, Nicholas Purefoy, a French Huguenot ^[4] refugee, had settled in Craven County ^[5] following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

While little is known of Purefoy's boyhood, he appears to have received limited formal education. Yet he was an avid reader and able writer, as evidenced by the numerous letters and other communications that he contributed to the *Biblical Recorder*—the Raleigh weekly published under the auspices of the Baptist denomination. Moreover, he had acquired early habits of thrift, industry, and sound business management which he utilized to good advantage in succeeding years. His financial success as farmer and merchant enabled him to contribute liberally to various benevolent causes, while amassing a considerable estate that he bequeathed to his children and grandchildren. He retired from active involvement in the mercantile business in 1873, although maintaining a considerable interest in business affairs until the end of his life.

Purefoy joined the Wake Union Baptist Church, of which his father was pastor, in 1834. Thereafter, he displayed a keen interest in the affairs of the Baptist denomination. Ordained to the work of the gospel ministry on 1 Mar. 1842, he served throughout the succeeding years as pastor of churches in Wake, Granville, Franklin, and Warren counties, including Tabb's Creek (1842–47), Wake Union (1846–50, 1851–58, and 1862–63), Corinth (1849–73 and 1875–76), Perry's Chapel (1860–67), Enon (1869–71), Sharon (1861–62, 1868–69, and 1873), Brassfields (1871–75), and Stoney Hill (1886–89). His reports as historian for the Central Baptist Association (1876–88) contain a wealth of data regarding various individuals and churches of the region. He was a charter member of the North Carolina Baptist Historical Society and its first president (1885–88). The financial affairs of the Baptist State Convention were entrusted to him when he served as treasurer from 1842 to 1870.

It was through his connections with Wake Forest College ^[6] as trustee, financial agent, and benefactor, however, that Purefoy accomplished his most significant work. As treasurer of the board of trustees, he exercised unusually sound judgment with his investments on behalf of the college. During the early years of the Civil War ^[7], he saved the institution from later bankruptcy by withholding a sizable portion of monies from investment in Confederate bonds. His work as financial agent prior to the war was instrumental in enabling the institution to erase a considerable indebtedness and to begin building a general endowment. He traveled throughout the Middle Atlantic and New England states during much of 1874–76, securing pledges of some \$10,000 for the endowment. After 29 Apr. 1874, reports on the progress of this campaign—together with Purefoy's observations on the civic, cultural, political, and religious conditions of the regions he canvassed—were published almost weekly in the *Biblical Recorder*. A liberal financial supporter of Wake Forest throughout his life, he bequeathed an additional sum of \$1,000 to the institution upon his death.

In December 1831 Purefoy married Mary Ransom Fort, the daughter of Foster Fort of Wake County. They became the parents of Addison Foster, Frederick Marion, Edgar Justin, John Knox, Emma E. (m. Phillip W. Johnson), and Isabella James (m. William Oscar Allen).

A portrait of Purefoy hangs in the reading room of the Ethel Taylor Crittenden Collection in Baptist History Wake Forest University ^[8]. He was buried in the town cemetery at Wake Forest.

References:

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