

THE COCHRAN FANATICISM IN YORK COUNTY

The history of fanaticism in this State can never be fully written without a record of the rise, spread, character, and influence of Cochranism. It dates from 1817 or 1818 and onward. Its range was in York County, with a few converts in other places. Its chief centre and fullest development was in the upper part of the town of Saco, Buxton, Hollis, North Kennebunkport and Scarborough. Its chief instigator, teacher, "head centre" and actor was Jacob Cochran, — hence its name.

From the manuscript letter of P. Huntoon, Esq., an intelligent and reliable citizen of Enfield, N.H., written in July, 1866, I learned the following particulars of the origin and early life of this imposter; —

He was born of highly respectable parents in Enfield, July 9th, 1785. They had immigrated to that place about eight years before, bringing four young children. His father and some of his brothers were evidently men of ability and integrity, esteemed by their fellow citizens, and honored as leading men in town affairs, and were elected as representatives to the legislature, and some of their posterity ultimately became authors and poets.

Jacob first comes to notice as a sutler of the army, in the War of 1812, where he could study human nature in its vilest forms, and where some thought he practiced the "Black Art."

In early manhood he professed to be converted through the labors of Miss Harriet Livermore, a daughter of Judge Livermore of Holderness, N. H., who was an able jurist, first occupying a seat on the bench of the Court of Common Pleas, and afterwards upon that of the Supreme Court of New Hampshire. Religiously he was a staunch Episcopalian, but his daughter, not sympathizing with

him, went forth as a Free-will Baptist preacher, and this is the only historical notoriety that she is known to have gained.

Mr. Cochran commenced his religious course with a great display of zeal, was fluent in exhortation, gifted in prayer, and gave promise of future distinction. But he soon left his native place, and traces of him cannot be found until he came to the surface in Maine, introducing himself as a regular preacher. But it is not known that he was then a member of any church, or that he had ever been ordained, for he had not preached in his native place. He did not profess to be connected with any religious sect, but expressed a controlling desire to unite all the denominations in a higher Christian life and in more earnest efforts to save souls.

He then held certain views not recognized as correct by any of the sects, but emphasized the essentials of Christianity, leaning strongly towards those of the Free-will Baptists and Christians.

His advent to Maine was near the close of the year 1816. He prepared his first sermon in this State in the town of Porter. He then had a wife and two children, was in the prime of manhood, (32 years of age,) with eyes sharp and peculiarly piercing, and his voice was strong, flexible and musical. He introduced himself, first, to Free-will Baptists preachers, and gained the confidence and good will of them generally; and these men sometimes in those days erred in excess of charity. He avoided Congregationalists and Calvinist Baptist ministers until his popularity was well established.

The inquiry naturally arises, what were the people who were entangled and misled by his sophistries? What were their antecedents, education, privileges and standing in society? They were an industrious, sober minded, and virtuous people, generally thrifty farmers, educated

as the public schools of that day afforded opportunity, and using more intoxicating drink than is now used, and less hostile to professed Christianity than the openly irreligious of the present day. The place where he won his greatest popularity and perpetrated his most infamous impostures lay between the Orthodox meeting houses of Saco, Buxton and Scarborough. Few of the people had associated much with those worshipping assemblies. It had been neglected as a dark border. A few years previous to Cochran's advent, Elder John Buzzell and other Free-will Baptist ministers had a protracted meeting in a grove, which resulted in a great excitement and produced a marked improvement among them. A Free-will Baptist Church was organized, a house of worship built, known as the Heath Meeting House, and a pious and worthy minister resided among them. A minister of the Christian order also dwelt there, and some of the converts clave unto him.

The Congregational churches encircling this new church then had pastors. Dr. Jonathan Cogswell was at Saco, highly reputed for good talents and devoted piety; Dr. Paul Coffin at Buxton, going there with the first settlers, a man of superior education, of great industry, a lover of good order as well as a lover of good things, but then advanced in years and embarrassed with their infirmities; and Rev. Nathan Tilton was in the upper part of Scarborough. On the border of Hollis there was a small Calvin Baptist Church and its pastor Rev. Mr. [Timothy] Ho[d]gdon distrusted Cochran from the beginning and faithfully warned his people to beware of him, and they wisely and prudently heeded it.

Under such circumstances Cochran commenced his public labors; and with a great show of sympathy, earnestness and deep religious feeling he took well with that people. He did not claim to belong to any existing sect; nor avow any design of forming a new one; but with a great show of sanctity strove to raise all believers to a

greater degree of devotion; — to the state of primitive piety, and if that was accomplished he said they would secure the privileges of the primitive Christians, the working of miracles and apostolic gifts. He said but little of these points of difference and dwelt largely on those already believed by his hearers. Considering his attractions as a public speaker, and remembering his unparalleled, artful cunning and deep penetration into human nature, it is not strange that the masses were drawn after him. He appointed meetings and they were thronged with hearers. He secured the confidence of the common people as a sincere Christian and approved minister of the gospel. Near the beginning of his rising popularity, Elder Clement Phinney of Gorham visited that place to preach to the people and to get acquainted with this new co-labourer. He was a man of great common sense, abounding with kindness and Christian charity, “a good man above many,” and highly esteemed by all as a faithful minister of the Gospel.

Mr. Cochran did not array himself against Eld. Phinney, nor presume to stand in his way as a rival; but artfully dropped into his shadow, yielding the ground to his appointments, attending all his meetings, joined with him in the services, commended his preaching and exhorted the people to receive it. But the kind hearted Elder cherished a silent distrust of his genuineness, and Cochran’s keen penetration perceived it. In a private interview Cochran complained that Eld. Phinney withheld his cordial fellowship and boldly asked him, why? That was Eld. Phinney’s golden opportunity. If like the intrepid Elijah, or the sainted Payson, the hypocritical mask would have been rent assunder, and the hidden iniquity have been revealed. But his excessive charity restrained him. He replied, “Jacob, I cannot take you into my heart. I love you at a distance;” raising his staff, — “I love you at the end of this stick.”

Eld. Phinney did not demand testimonials of his good standing; he did not call for the reasons of the hope that was in him; nor did anyone else; but treated him with Christian and ministerial courtesy. Had he done so a mighty evil might have been quenched at its kindling; a moral pestilence rolled back, which crushed many an unsuspecting victim.

Some religious interest was awaked, and Mr. Cochran stood ready to follow it up and draw the converts after him when Elder Phinney left the ground. In this he succeeded and his popularity rapidly increased. In the Spring and Summer of 1817 his operations and meetings were seriously impairing the attendance at Dr. Coffin's meetings in Buxton. This aroused the people to adopt measures to prevent it. Proposals were made to the aged pastor to have a colleague employed, and he consented. Mr. Levi Loring, who had followed school teaching, and had then been studying theology with Dr. Cogswell, was engaged to preach on the Sabbath, and in the Autumn of 1817 he was installed as colleague pastor of that church.

Then Cochran had a large number of permanent followers, and many occasional hearers. He was active and persevering, holding meetings in various neighborhoods, and thus extending his acquaintance and popularity. He also pressed his way into other towns; Hollis, Waterborough and Biddeford fell in his way, and the northern part of Kennebunkport proved to be an inviting field for his endeavors. There a Baptist church had held the ground, with its house of worship and stated meetings, but then was without a resident minister. With few exceptions the people with one accord received him, but few doubted his worthiness, none opposed; and this became one of his strongholds. In the vicinity of the Heath Meeting House in Saco he still made his headquarters; and there in the Summer of 1818 [1817] there was an extensive and powerful revival. In this he was not

alone, other faithful ministers joined in it, but Cochran was the master spirit. One who shared in this work, and who in after life professed to speak impartially, affirmed that in the preaching and other exercises its meetings were conducted as Methodist, Free-will Baptist and Christian meetings in times of revivals generally were. It drew many from adjoining vicinities. There was great excitement, loud responses, shouts, and various outbursts of emotion, but no grievous departures from the rapturous religious feeling. It was for a while considered by many as a good work; and to some extent so it proved. Two thousand were thought to be converted and they did not all prove to be chaff; some of them became accepted and useful ministers in the Methodist, Free-will Baptist and Christian connections, and some of them proved to be good members in different churches.

God sometimes honors his truth, though it be mixed with hurtful error — though unsanctified lips proclaim it.

In this noted revival Cochran rose to the highest crest of his popular wave, and in consequence of it precipitated himself into his deepest disgrace. He could not modestly and temperately bear such unexpected popularity. He did not exalt the Divine Power and realize his own mere instrumentality. His most sanguine admirers became mentally intoxicated, and did not repress indecent adulation. Females in the craze of their fanaticism would embrace him in public meeting and unblushingly kiss him, and he found apology for it in "the holy kiss" of Scripture. Previous to this he had not broached any of his corrupt and damnable heresies. He had intimated innovations, but had not pressed them; had aspired to leadership, but moved towards it in an adroit and modest way. He now felt that Cochranism had become rooted, and he proceeded to give it a distinct form.

He assailed the institution of Freemasonry with unsparing severity. He contended that the Eucharist was now useless, as much so as the Jewish Passover. But baptism, and that by immersion, he exalted as essential to salvation, and administered it to all who professed to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, whether they had before so received it or not, if they would consent to it. These baptismal scenes are remembered as exhibitions of revolting and wild enthusiasms. A great rabble-rout would gather. Some would pray, some sing, some shout, some roll upon the ground, and all together raise a confused tumult. His fame spread, and other wandering stars scented from afar their disgusting idiocracies, and were drawn to his aid. For in other parts audacious heresies had been preached, and vile free love abominations practiced by the Osgoodites, and others, under the sacred garb of Christianity; and it is said that notorious adepts of this sort — pre-historic Mormons — came to Cochran's aid and helped sink him to his worst behavior. From the "holy kiss" which had been common, the "holy dance" was only a slight advance, and this became another addition to their worship.

These things began to awaken disgust in the crowded ranks of his followers. There was doubt, debate and confusion in the tents of Jacob. Many who had been in good repute as Christians before recoiled in disgust and walked no longer with him. This withdrew a conservative force, and left an enthusiastic portion easily moulded by his will. He knew his position, and conscious of his power, immoderately used it.

His next, and worst of all his devices, was his assault upon the sacred bonds of matrimony for the most corrupt purposes, and by the most revolting machinations he attempted to demolish this divine and all prevalent institution. Given in Eden for the virtuous propagation of the race; as the guardian of the most precious social

enjoyments, it has kept pace with the descending ages, defying barbarism, ignorance, heathenism and lust; and yet this besotten fanatic, in the sacred name of religion thrust a dagger into its vitals. He taught a spiritual matrimony sanctioned by a ceremony of his own, into which any man or woman, already married or unmarried, might enter choosing at pleasure a spiritual wife or spiritual husband, with all the privileges of a legitimate marriage. Existing vows were violated, connubial happiness tortured often with the forsaken party, and hitherto happy families severed. And soon it did not wait for any ceremony, but liberty was taken to practice unbridled licentiousness, of which Cochran himself was the most noted example.

Thus the man who professed to be sent of God to raise the Christian church to a higher state of spiritual life, practice and enjoyment, taught and practiced corrupting immoralities, which common decency scorns. Many deluded by him early, but had not become besides themselves, now broke off all connection with him; no faithful minister failed to denounce him, and kind warnings were sent to his deceived partisans to reclaim them if possible. But many still adhered to him; many who had been hitherto modest and virtuous, but now having no other rule of action but his word, no confidence in any persons which he did not approve, no other worship than that which he prescribed. Some connected themselves, their families, their property entirely to his dictation, and he was verily King in his realm; a title that he had slurringly applied to such ministers as opposed him.

With the means contributed by his followers he purchased a house a little retired from the river-road running from Saco Village to Buxton, and in this his wife and children resided, and several others of his deluded followers. Here too he had a regular harem, consisting of several unmarried females, some of them formerly

belonging to respectable families, now subjects of his seduction and nothing else than his concubines.

Nor were his vile practices confined to himself, nor to these concubines, but wherever he went he corrupted any wife, mother or maiden that he could seduce, and his devoted followers generally walked in the same steps. With true fanatical zeal he pressed on in propagating his actions and corrupting views. In addition to the places already mentioned, he went into Waterborough, Alfred, Newfield, Limington, Sweden and Conway, N. H.; but he met with small success in these places. In Kennebunk and York he left a few traces of his blighting delusions. He loudly boasted that he would sweep every thing before him from Buxton to the sea, but he did not shake the solid ramparts that Saco Village held up against him. He pretended to have power to work miracles; but always failed in the presence of intelligent observers, though he deceived his besotted dupes by saying, your lack of faith prevents it. In Conway, N. H., he told a sick woman that he could heal her by the laying on of his hands, but she indignantly refused to allow him to try. And sometimes he would escape a crushing refutation by his ingenious devices. He insisted upon this as an unquestionable dogma, — “You must never look back;” so if he predicted a certain thing was to take place, and it failed, or if he promised to work a miracle, and it failed, his followers must not look back and see the failure.

When in the height of his power and of his wildest enthusiasm, his meetings beggared description. They would always be crowded. His dupes would come with wild and excited countenances. It would start with singing, prayer, loud speaking, clamorous responses, accompanied with violent gestures. Some would roll upon the floor, and others, if the room permitted, would join in marches and dances to swell the tumult. Cochran would pass around directing one to do this, another that, to show his absolute

control over them; but carefully passing unnoticed such as seemed to have the stamina to withstand him. Such were his measures where he had gained the people; in a new place he was more cautious. If a stranger entered his meeting, when the excitement was in full blast, he would fix his keen eyes upon him, and if he withstood that glare without flinching he would let him alone; but if he quailed under his piercing gaze he would feel sure of his man, and would soon draw him into his vortex. In but few instances did he ever mistake the mettle of his subject.

On one occasion he encountered a stranger, who had evinced considerable firmness, but he thought to subdue him. He began his artifices, and soon commanded him to make some sign of submission. The man firmly refused. He repeated his mandate with loud pretensions of miraculous power, and with harsh menaces of fearful punishment. Still the subject sat as unmoved as a statue. He still plied him, finally threatening, "if you do not instantly obey me I will send you right down to hell." This did not avail. Cochran approached his unterrified subject, took him by the hair of his head, and in a magisterial tone said, "now you are going right down to hell." He coolly replied, "I don't know but I am, for the devil has got me by the foretop." There the contest ended.

In another instance a woman drove him. He called where this lady was making an afternoon visit. She was intelligent, argumentative and well read in the Scriptures, and took him to the law and the testimony, and with all his tact he found himself worsted in argument. He also attempted to terrify her by threatening to call down the judgment of God upon her; if she did not stop her opposition to him she would be smitten dumb. She fearlessly replied, "if you wont touch me I can risk all else." He solemnly invoked the curse, but his power was not sufficient to tame a woman's tongue moving in defence of truth and virtue.

At the height of his career he boasted that he had seven hundred church members, all re-baptised by him and received into his distinct connection. But let it not be understood that all these went to the full extent of fanaticism and vice which he allowed and practiced. Many never went into the inside of his dark arcana; many revolted at these disreputable reports and would not believe them, while others were drawn by these vile proceedings and joined with him, and rioted in them.

One of his early followers, a man in middle life, of good moral character, who resided at a distance from Cochran's abode, made him a friendly visit. He was pleasantly received and affectionately treated. His acquaintance and attachment had been formed in the better portion of Cochran's career, and he had sternly rejected all the defamatory reports as false that had gone out against him. But when the time to retire to rest came Cochran assigned him to a bed already occupied in part by one of Cochran's women. The man was thunderstruck. He had lived many years in conjugal fidelity with his wife, and had children rising to manhood. He chose a place upon the floor, rather than enter that adulterous bed, and rose in the morning to be sharply reproved by the teacher he had thought perfect. But his eyes were opened. He renounced his favorite teacher, and no longer was one of his followers.

So it would have been in all probability with a large part of the seven hundred whom he counted as his members, had they fully known the depths of his devices. It may here be remarked, that not one of Elder Ho[d]gdon's church was led astray by these tempestuous delusions; nor a single member of the Buxton Congregational Church taken captive by it. And though in those days, when so many ran after him, some from that congregation went with the multitude to see what these strange things were;

yet not one regular attendant was ensnared, not one young person from such families turned.

The Baptist Church in North Kennebunk did not so safely weather the storm. When its reliable members discovered the cloven foot of Cochranism, they turned back and went no longer with it; but it had taken root in the neighborhood, and long abode there. The church received a staggering blow, and at length gave up its identity. Then as in other places many came to themselves, but its deadly wound never fully healed.

We may now seriously ask, why such bald iniquities were tolerated in civilized and religious communities? Why did not observing people rise up, and invoking the power of the law, demolish it? Eventually it did. But it must be remembered that it did not float its banner in the villages, or among the most refined people. Its meetings were early forsaken by respectable classes, who warned their neighbors to avoid them, so that the masses did not realize the dark turpitude of their proceedings. And it was well known that the cry of persecution would be raised if any power was applied to suppress the most disreputable fanaticism. But in due time it wrought its own destruction. Emboldened by his frequent successes and by the lenience which the appointed guardians of public morals had shown him, he boldly entangled himself where injury found proper resentment.

Calling one day upon a certain family, the husband found it necessary to step out for a short absence, and upon returning caught him in a criminal connection with his wife. This was too much for his principles or patience. He did not however settle the abuse as another husband did a similar offence, by seizing his ox-goad and giving him a smart drubbing, but went to a magistrate and had him legally arrested. A great commotion followed in the ranks of his fast friends and followers. Fanaticism boiled

over, but flowed in different streams of folly. The most infatuated believed that his professed miraculous powers would be his safeguard, and that he could carry his own part, and deliver himself from any officers, or bonds, or imprisonments. But this failed for want of faith in his environments probably. Others proposed to arm their male forces and go forth, and by “*vi et armis*” rescue him from his custodians, but too much cool counsel lingered among them to attempt such an adventure. And his adherents still seemed to think that he had not violated any laws, human or divine, or outraged any of the social virtues.

But by this Cochranism was death struck, a steady depletion from his counted ranks followed. Heretical spiritual matrimony tottered and fell; its entangled victims returned to their former homes and wives, and silently sought to keep out of harm’s way.

Cochran was still at liberty, though found guilty and bound over to the next Court his friends furnished satisfactory bonds, but he confined his visits to his tried and trusty friends and abstained from his lawless seductions.

The Court before which he was arraigned was at York; his bondsmen presented him, but did not deliver him to the custody of the Court and take up their bond, but continued their responsibility for him. The grand jury returned a “true bill” against him, and Hon. John Holmes of Alfred was retained as counsel.

When the testimony was all in and the case committed to the jury, he thought it prudent to beat a hasty retreat. Some say he did this through the advice of his lawyer, and perhaps with the consent of his bondsmen; certainly with the knowledge and assistance of some of his friends. He was taken into a chaise and hurried off over an unfrequented road, and dropped at a point whence he

could take to the woods and reach the top of a hill which overlooked the highway homeward. Here he kept concealed until, in the darkness of night, a friend came with a carriage, gave the concerted signal, called him out and conveyed him away.

The jury convicted him, but sentence could not be pronounced in the absence of the prisoner. At the next term of the Court he was arraigned and sentenced to the State's Prison at Charlestown for a term of four years.

Between his escape from York Court House and his conveyance to the Penitentiary he kept quite close, in retired families, in Biddeford and Kennebunkport; and if reports are correct the rights of property were not always respected.

Cochranism had now received its death blow. It had been well given. It fell upon the Head of the Beast. Others were guilty, and were pestilent in their influence and deeds, but he was the leader, the corrupter, the most guilty.

After he was thus removed it dwindled away, and stayed its poison. Many of his victims discovered their folly and shame, and deeply repented of it; but a few were so thoroughly taken captive that they still adhered to it, aiding and encouraging each other, and occasionally meeting in some private house, and waiting their leader's enlargement.

After his liberation from prison he gathered his family, and such as cast in their lot with him, and, by the aid of friends, purchased a small farm in a remote part of Hollis. They procured provisions by making and selling willow baskets. As the different articles were brought in they were all laid down at his feet, and apportioned to each one, as he thought best.

Sunday he held meetings, noisy and boisterous, to which the curious were sometimes attracted.

One incident while there deserves to be remembered. A Baptist minister had appointed a lecture in a school-house near by, but failed to meet the appointment. The people gathered, waited long and became convinced that he would not reach them. One of the deacons of a respectable Baptist church was present; he was well acquainted with Cochran's whole career, but strange to relate proposed to send for Cochran and have him preach to them. As soon as he was sent for he came, and knowing whom he was dealing with, he preached such things as were acceptable to them. Let each one make his own comments.

His children attended the public schools, and there was necessarily some commingling with their neighbors, but no one pried into their private domestic practices.

Sometime about 1829 the clan removed from this place and left the State, and their resting place is not sufficiently well known to state it.

At length death overtook him. An affecting interest gathers around that honest hour in the history of such a man. It is said that he was penitent and bemoaned his apostacy; affirming that when he commenced his work as a minister his professions were sincere, his motives good, his intentions right and honorable; but elevated by his success, and thrown off his guard by the excessive confidence and indiscreet conduct of his admirers, he fell into those depths of Satan, in which we have traced him. A person, who nursed him in his last sickness, spoke in high terms of his devout and humble appearances.

It must be admitted that his case presents a hard subject for the religious anatomist.

After his death his wife, and such as still survived of his attachees, came back to Saco, from New York State, bringing the remains of her husband. For a season they

rested in the family burying place of Mr. John Dennett. A marble stone stood over it bearing, with the usual inscription, the following borrowed epitaph, —

He hath dispersed his alms abroad, —
His works are still before his God,
His name on earth shall long remain,
While envious sinners fret in vain.

Here again comment is not necessary.

Able friends assisted them, so that a permanent home and ordinary comforts were enjoyed by them until Mrs. Cochran's death.

His oldest son is said to have made himself wealthy by inventing a yale-lock, and obtaining a patent for it, and they had daughters married, respectably and comfortably.

The mother, who had always borne a good name, was not forgotten in her last sickness. Sometime about 1850 she also expired.

Another removal of Cochran's remains followed this event. They were disinterred, and with those of his wife removed from the State privately, and in the resurrection they will undoubtedly rise from some spot in the eastern part of Enfield, New Hampshire. Those concerned strove to keep the removal a secret. The monument was concealed for a while, and then used, with a new inscription, for another person's grave.

A few years more will consign the last of that people to the dust; but not entirely to forgetfulness.

Their history was briefly sketched by Elder E[phraim] Stinchfield, a cotemporary, who passed over the ground soon after Cochran's imprisonment. Elder C[lement] Phinney gave to his biographer a short account of it from his own personal recollection. In the history of the Free-will Baptists mention is made of it. But most of the

above has been gleamed from the personal statements of persons who were eye witnesses of his labors.

Dated August 3rd, 1867.