

“I have fought a good fight”: William Ellis Foy as a Millerite

by Benjamin J. Baker

Here is the story of a forgotten Millerite who had a significant influence on the founders of Adventism.

The Millerite movement of the 1830s and 40s is one of the most dynamic in the religious history of the United States. The names of certain Millerites stand out: William Miller, the founder; Joshua Himes, the public relations mastermind; Charles Fitch, the bold preacher; and Ellen Harmon, James White, and Joseph Bates, who would go on to found the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But one of Millerism’s most compelling figures is lesser known. This individual was entrusted with the rarest of gifts, which he used during the most historically inhospitable of times. Against tremendous odds, he grew to great prominence as a minister, blessing the lives of thousands. Ellen White vividly remembered him more than half a century after she first encountered him. His name: William Ellis Foy.¹

Early life

Foy was born in a rural setting just north of Augusta, Maine, in 1818, to African American parents, Joseph and Elizabeth Foy. As was often the case during that time, the Foy family lived among a small collective of black families, making a living by farming a modest plot they owned. Although little is known about William’s early

life, it was most likely consumed with helping run the farm and associating with the children of other black families in the area. When Foy was 15, the family moved to Palermo, Maine.

Frequent visits to the nearby city of Augusta brought Foy in contact with Silas Curtis, a local Freewill Baptist minister. Foy recalls: “In the year 1835, under the preaching of Elder Silas Curtis, I was led to inquire what I should do to be saved. Christians directed me to the lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world.” After a time of despairing if God would accept such a sinner as he, the 17-year-old had a breakthrough when he realized the extent of God’s grace: “I then became willing to give up all... I then saw such a fullness in Christ that I wanted to proclaim it to all the world. Oh the glory of God that filled my soul! Three months rolled away in which I enjoyed sweet communion with my God.”²

Interrupting his months-long joy came “a trial by those who should have been nursing fathers in Israel... ”³ But Foy accepted wise advice from another “father in Israel,” and became fully integrated into the life of the church, even learning to read there. After “three months disobedience” of resisting baptism, Foy

was baptized by Curtis. Shortly after, he decided to become a minister.

Move to Boston

Foy married Ann⁴ in about 1836, and the couple had their first child, Amelia, the next year. The Foy family relocated to Boston in 1840, residing in the historic Beacon Hill district. There Foy set out to obtain Episcopalian clergy credentials and learned a trade to support his family. The Boston years kept the budding preacher busy with speaking engagements in the many churches in the bustling city. Shortly after his move to Boston, Foy became acquainted with Millerite teachings. Although initially averse to it, the young preacher soon embraced the doctrine of the Second Advent.

During this time, at the very height of the Millerite movement, Foy had his first prophetic experience. On January 18, 1842, in the Twelfth Street Baptist Church on Southock Street, the 23-year-old “met with the people of God ... where the Christians were engaged in solemn prayer, and my soul was made happy in the love of God. I was immediately seized as in the agonies of death, and my breath left me; and it appeared to me that I was a spirit separate from

this body.”⁵ In this vision, Foy was given a tour of the Christian’s heaven, which he later powerfully described with rich metaphors and symbolism.

Just after beholding the unspeakable glories of heaven, Foy sank into depression and despondency, feeling that he should share what he had seen, but not doing so: “I was disobedient, settling upon this point for an excuse, that my guide did not command me so to do; and I thereby, brought darkness, and death, upon my soul. But I could find no peace or comfort. I began to doubt whether indeed my soul had been converted, and although I often met with the people of God, I obtained no relief, but felt distressed and lonely. I could get no access in prayer.”⁶

To alleviate this desperate state, Foy wrote down his vision and had it published. But alas, he was unsatisfied with the finished product and remained miserable.

Exchange of miseries

William Foy would soon exchange miseries. On February 4, 1842, at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Beacon Hill, Boston, he again went into vision. This time the sanctuary was standing-room only, and Foy, giving up his seat to a friend, “immediately fell to the floor, and knew nothing about this body, until twelve hours and a half had passed away, as I was afterward informed.”⁷ This revelation depicted a solemn judgment scene in which some whom Foy knew were refused entrance into heaven. Following this was an awesome scene of those who entered heaven in surreal panoply. This time Foy’s guide told him to share what he had witnessed.

Of course, at that time millions of Foy’s racial counterparts were enslaved on plantations south of the Mississippi River. This reality pressed in on Foy, and he wrote: “... knowing the prejudice among the people against those of my color, it became

very crossing.” These misgivings, combined with the uniqueness of the visionary experience, caused the young man to continually question: “Why should these things be given to me, to bear to the world, and not to the learned, or to one of a different condition from myself?”⁸ His “condition” could have referred to a number of things: his race, age, relative poverty, social status, or even his only-recent literacy. Whatever the case, a burden from above rested so heavily on his soul as to nearly suffocate it.

Four days after the second vision, J.B. Husted, pastor of the nearby Broomfield Street Church, visited Foy with several of his parishioners. His request was straightforward: tell our church what you have seen. Foy agreed, and they arranged that he speak the following afternoon. After they left, Foy regretted his decision, thinking that “had the world been mine it would cheerfully be given, to have the appointment recalled.”⁹

As the time approached to go to Broomfield Street, “temptations began sorely to afflict [me]. I feared lest my guide would not be with me, and I should be unable to tell the people the things which had been shown me.”¹⁰ Ironically, this also happened to another Millerite to whom God gave visions.¹¹ But Foy’s willingness is what saved him, for he was escorted to the church by a “band of brethren” who perceptively discerned his struggle. When he entered, a large group greeted him, and, as he descriptively puts it, “each individual seemed like a mountain.”¹²

In a last-ditch effort, the terrified Foy asked Pastor Husted to begin the meeting with prayer, hoping that the occasion would turn into a prayer meeting and he would be relieved of his duty. But as the pastor prayed, Foy heard a voice say, “I am with thee; and I promised to be with thee!” At that moment, “my heart then began to burn within me, the fear of man suddenly fled, and

unspeakable glory filled my soul.”¹³ Foy then shared his visions so eloquently and powerfully that he was inundated with requests to speak, his calendar booked months in advance. John Loughborough, the first historian of Seventh-day Adventism, has this to say about Foy: “Mr. Foy’s visions related to the near advent of Christ, the travels of the people of God to the heavenly city, the new earth, and the glories of the redeemed state. Having a good command of language, with fine descriptive powers, he created a sensation wherever he went. By invitation he went from city to city to tell of the wonderful things he had seen; and in order to accommodate the vast crowds who assembled to hear him, large halls were secured, where he related to thousands what had been shown him of the heavenly world, the loveliness of the New Jerusalem, and of the angelic hosts. When dwelling on the tender, compassionate love of Christ for poor sinners, he exhorted the unconverted to seek God, and scores responded to his entreaties.”¹⁴

After three months of constant speaking, fearing that his family was not being provided for, Foy did manual labor for another three-month period, but “could find no rest day nor night, until again I consented to do my duty.” Foy commenced touring, attesting that although he “suffered persecution,” his guide was with him.

Ellen White’s memories of Foy

Around this time the Foys moved to Portland, Maine, the city where Ellen White’s family lived. In a 1906 interview, the septuagenarian recalled her experience as a teenager going with her family on several occasions to hear William Foy speak: “He [William Foy] came to give it [lecture on visions] right to the hall, in the great hall where we attended, Beethoven Hall. That was quite a little time after the visions. It was

in Portland, Maine. We went over to Cape Elizabeth to hear him lecture. Father always took me with him when we went, and he would be going in a sleigh, and he would invite me to get in, and I would ride with them. That was before I got any way acquainted with him.”¹⁵

White also recalled the opportunity she had to talk with the popular Millerite preacher: “I had an interview with him. He wanted to see me, and I talked with him a little. They had appointed for me to speak that night, and I did not know that he was there. I did not know at first that he was there. While I was talking I heard a shout, and he is a great, tall man, and the roof was rather low, and he jumped right up and down, and oh, he praised the Lord, praised the Lord. It was just what he had seen, just what he had seen. But they extolled him so I think it hurt him, and I do not know what became of him.

“His wife was so anxious. She sat looking at him, so that it disturbed him. ‘Now,’ said he, ‘you must not get where you can look at me when I am speaking.’ He had on an Episcopalian robe. His wife sat by the side of me. She kept moving about and putting her head behind me. What does she keep moving about so for? We found out when he came to his wife. ‘I did as you told me to,’ said she. ‘I hid myself. I did as you told me to.’ (So that he should not see her face.) She would be so anxious, repeating the words right after him with her lips. After the meeting was ended, and he came to look her up, she said to him, ‘I hid myself. You didn’t see me.’ He was a very tall man, slightly colored. But it was remarkable [the] testimonies that he bore.

“I always sat right close by the stand. I know what I sat there for now. It hurt me to breathe, and with the breaths all around me I knew I could breathe easier right by the

stand, so I always took my station.”¹⁶

One suspects that Foy had a significant influence on Ellen Harmon during her formative teenage years. Before she herself experienced the prophetic gift, she saw this charismatic young black man effectively sharing his visions and winning souls to Christ – all of this under tough circumstances not unlike the hurdles of age, gender, lack of education, and ill health that she would have to overcome to be an effective spokesperson for God. She also owned a copy of the booklet detailing his visions, which he would later publish. Further, her initial visions bear striking similarities to Foy’s, as he enthusiastically made clear when the two switched roles after the Great Disappointment and Foy listened to her speak of her vision. Finally, the Millerites who became Seventh-day Adventists saw the ignition of the spirit of prophecy in the life of William Foy as proof that the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14 was approaching its fulfillment.¹⁷

In Portland, William Foy encountered the same sort of racial persecution as he did elsewhere. The *Portland Tribune* of February 10, 1844, carried the following piece: “When will wonders cease? The *Millerites* of this city have recently imported a great bull nigger, who has been rolling up the white of his eyes, showing his ivory, and astonishing the good people by his dreams and prognostications. It is said the fat and greasy black can neither read nor write – but he told of the joys of the blest and the wailings of the damned with such gusto that even the weakest disciple of the prophet smacked his lips for more. What will be the end of these things, we cannot divine... We soon expect to see this fat bull nigger, superbly dressed, seated in a chariot, and drawn through our streets, by the devoted disciples of Miller, who will bow down and worship him as a God.”¹⁸

Editorials like this prove that Foy was neither paranoid nor delusional for fearing racial animosity toward him at speaking engagements. Nor was he exaggerating when he reported that he suffered persecution after he began lecturing. That this piece would be featured in the official newspaper of a racially-progressive and tolerant city like Portland, Maine, is telling.

More visions

Foy continued to have visions – at least two more. Loughborough speaks of a third vision in which three fiery steps ascended up a pathway; on each step were multitudes of people who began falling off into oblivion while others advanced to heaven.¹⁹ Ellen White insists that Foy had a fourth vision whose content is unknown, although she might have been privy to the details of the final revelation now lost to us. What is known is that Foy had both of these visions around the summer of 1844.

In early 1845, Foy collaborated with two Millerite brothers, John and Charles Pearson – sons of the respected Sabbatarian Adventist Father Pearson, and minor pioneers in their own right – and published the 24-page pamphlet *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy*. In it, Foy shares his conversion experience and describes his first two visions. On the last page is a testimonial of 10 individuals vouching for the authenticity of Foy’s visions, as well as a copy of his certificate of church membership, both requisite bona fides in that day.²⁰ It is significant that Foy published this booklet after the Great Disappointment, indicating a continued commitment to the second coming of Jesus and to the encouragement of the broken believers. His attendance at a gathering in 1845 where Ellen Harmon spoke about her vision also bears this out.

And thus was the Millerite era for William Foy. After 1845, as far

as is known, he lost contact with those who would eventually become Seventh-day Adventists – Ellen Harmon and John Loughborough – and continued his ministry, albeit on a considerably smaller stage. Taking residence alternately in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and the Maine towns of Chelsea, Burnham, Mount Desert Island, and East Sullivan, Foy pastored interracial and predominantly white Baptist congregations.

In *Sullivan and Sorrento since Seventeen-Sixty*, lay genealogist Lelia Clark Johnson remembers Foy as being an “esteemed and beloved” minister who held religious meetings in various places.²¹ William Foy died on November 9, 1893, and is buried in Birch Tree Cemetery in Sullivan, Maine. On his tombstone is chiseled the epitaph:

I have fought a good fight,
I have finished my course,
I have kept the faith:
henceforth there is laid up
for me a crown of righteousness.²²

Lessons from Foy’s ministry

The lessons of William Foy’s three years in the spotlight of the Millerite movement are plentiful and potent. First, one can have a major impact in a brief amount of time. Foy’s visionary career lasted just three years, yet it still encourages and instructs 170 years later.

Second, God does use the newly converted in unheard-of ways. Foy was 17 when he came to Christ, and 23 when he had his first vision. How was this sufficient time to prepare him? What were his credentials for such a weighty task? It doesn’t matter what we make of it; God ordained it, and that is that.

Third, our weakness is God’s strength. At his conversion, Foy was an illiterate black farm boy. Just a few years later, he was a forceful, sophisticated Boston preacher. The bulk of people of his race were in bondage in the very same country in which Foy

enlightened whites about the things of God. Next is the absolute necessity of remaining humble. Foy recognized and appreciated his weakness and inability; thus, it didn’t enter his mind to trust in his own strength, because he had none.

Fifth, much can be said of William Foy actually stepping out in obedience. He stated that the people to whom he was called to speak seemed like mountains, and he was scared of them, but he focused on Christ and did what he was told to do. Aside from his race, having visions was not a normal and accepted thing, even in prophet-rich 19th century New England. Foy’s vulnerability in admitting his fear and inadequacy is compellingly touching, and all can immediately identify to a lesser or greater degree with his dilemma.

Lastly, like Foy, we are a people of prophecy. As unlikely as it may seem, God used this unassuming young man to herald and prepare humanity for one of the greatest events in salvation history: Jesus’ entrance into the heavenly sanctuary, the final phase of His preparatory work. Seventh-day Adventists, especially we who are alive at this time, are also a people of prophecy, called to usher in Jesus’ second coming. You can be used in a vital way as was Foy.

During this commemoration of 150 years of Seventh-day Adventism, may the bright star of William Foy’s ministry inspire us to complete our God-given mission.

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2. William E. Foy, *Christian Experience* (Portland, Maine: J. and C.H. Pearson, 1845), 7-8.
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. Ann’s maiden name is not known.
5. Foy, *Christian Experience*, 9.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. *Ibid.*, 16.
8. *Ibid.*, 21.
9. *Ibid.*, 21.
10. *Ibid.*, 22.
11. A man named Hazen Foss had received visions but consistently refused to relate them, but when he finally attempted to share them, he could not recall what he was shown.
12. *Ibid.*, 22.
13. *Ibid.*, 22.
14. J.N. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1906), 146.
15. Ellen G. White, “Interview with Mrs. E.G. White, re: Early Experiences” (Manuscript 131, 1906), 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 4-6.
17. See Loughborough, 146.
18. “When will wonders cease?” *Portland Tribune*, February 10, 1844.
19. Loughborough, 146-147.
20. William E. Foy, *Christian Experience* (Portland, Maine: J. and C.H. Pearson, 1845), 24.
21. Lelia A. Clark Johnson, *Sullivan and Sorrento since Seventeen-Sixty* (Ellsworth, Maine: Hancock County Publishing Company, 1953), 65-66.
22. Baker, 132.