

James Waddell (Waddel)¹ and the Church of the Blind Preacher

James Waddell (Waddel) who became known locally as the “Blind Preacher” was a Presbyterian minister widely known for his eloquence. His church stood about one-half mile northeast of what is known today as the Gordonsville traffic circle on Highway 15. In the 1700s the “circle” was actually a crossroads of the Richmond road running east-west and the Fredericksburgh [sic] road running north-south. On the southeast corner of the crossroads sat the house and tavern of Nathaniel Gordon, originally from Lancaster County, Virginia, whose land became part of the early town.²

Waddell was born in 1739 either in County Down, Ireland or on the immigrant ship his parents were on as they crossed the Atlantic on their voyage to eastern Pennsylvania where they settled for a time. As a boy his left hand was nearly severed by his older brother who wielded an ax in pursuit of a rabbit. Although he kept his hand, the damage was permanent so his father had him educated by the Reverend Doctor Finley in Nottingham, Pennsylvania at what was considered one of the best schools in the colony. Eventually he became an assistant teacher to Rev. Finley. Benjamin Rush became one of his pupils.³ Dr. Rush of Philadelphia grew up to be a physician and politician who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and served in the Continental Army.

Waddell’s first job was as a teacher with the Rev. John Todd of Louisa County. Studying theology with Rev. Todd, Waddell became licensed as a preacher in 1761 by Hanover Presbytery. He eventually settled in Lancaster County with a large population of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.⁴ Before long the eloquence of his preaching attracted much attention. In his diary, Colonel James Gordon of Lancaster alluded to the sensation in that county caused by the young preacher.⁵ Waddell appeared to be close to the Gordon family while in Lancaster where he baptised Col. Gordon’s son Nathaniel in 1763⁶ and married his sister Mary at their father’s home called *Verville*.⁷

Soon after the Revolutionary War began, James purchased *Springhill* and moved to Augusta County due to “his health being impaired by the climate of the lower country.”⁸ There he preached regularly at the Tinkling Spring church and in Staunton. During the war he took an

¹ Name has been spelled various ways by various authors.

² William H.B. Thomas, *Gordonsville, Virginia-Historic Crossroads Town* (Orange, Virginia: Green Publishers, Inc., 1971), 1-2.

³ Jos. A. Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County, Virginia* from 1726 to 1781 (Staunton, Virginia: C. Russell Caldwell Publisher, 1902), 329-330.

⁴ At this time in Virginia, the dominant church was the Anglican Church with its roots in the Church of England.

⁵ Waddell, 330.

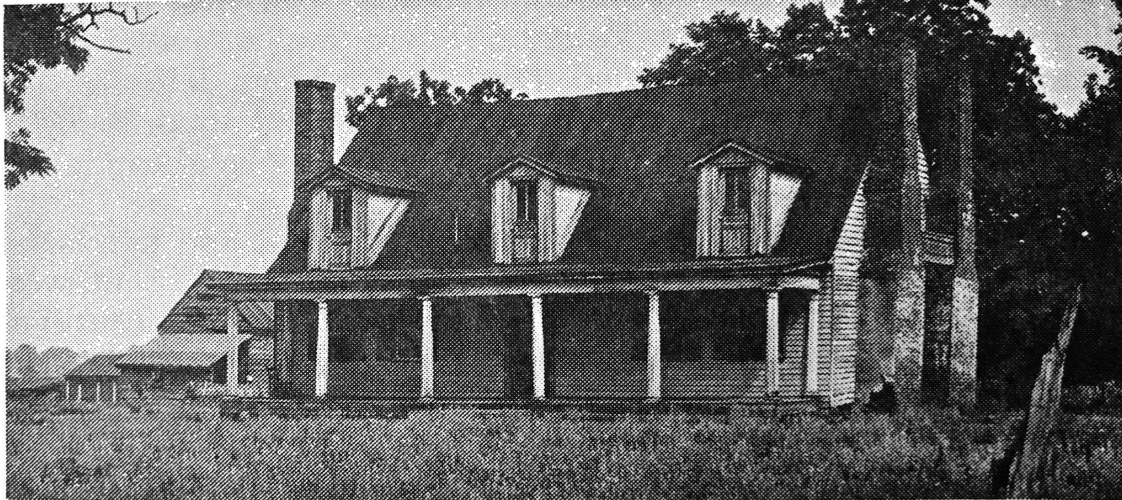
⁶ Thomas, 4.

⁷ Author not listed. “Verville”. *National Register of Historic Places*, Google, Accessed April 15, 2021 <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail?assetID=9a4ff5ec-4b86-4271-bf17-a67f9a3824d8>

⁸ Waddell

active part in the movement for religious freedom and is said to have written the Legislature on that subject.⁹

After the war, Waddell moved back to Louisa near the town of Gordonsville where he lived out the last twenty years of his life on his estate, Hopewell. The photo below was taken by M.B. Waff (date unknown) and published by William H.B. Thomas in his book, *Gordonsville, Virginia: Historic Crossroads Town*.¹⁰



Hopewell, near Gordonsville, home of Rev. James Waddell; built ca. 1785-1790
(M. B. Waff, photographer)

During part of this time period, Waddell was totally blind from cataracts but recovered part of his sight after an operation. He continued to preach, most of the time from a log meeting-house that he built by hand and was known as the “Blind Preacher”. Well respected throughout the area, he often preached at other churches by invitation. He died in 1805 and was buried on his plantation.¹¹

Waddell was eloquent and his words moved people. “William Wirt, later Attorney General of the United States but in the early 1800’s a young lawyer inclined toward literature, coming upon the meager chapel by the Orange road, paused to listen. In a memorable passage from *The Letters of the British Spy* published in 1803, Wirt described the scene:

You are to bring before you the venerable figure of the preachers; his blindness, constantly recalling to your recollection old Homer, Ossian and Milton, and associating with his performance, the melancholy grandeur of their geniuses; you are to imagine that you hear his slow, solemn, well-accented

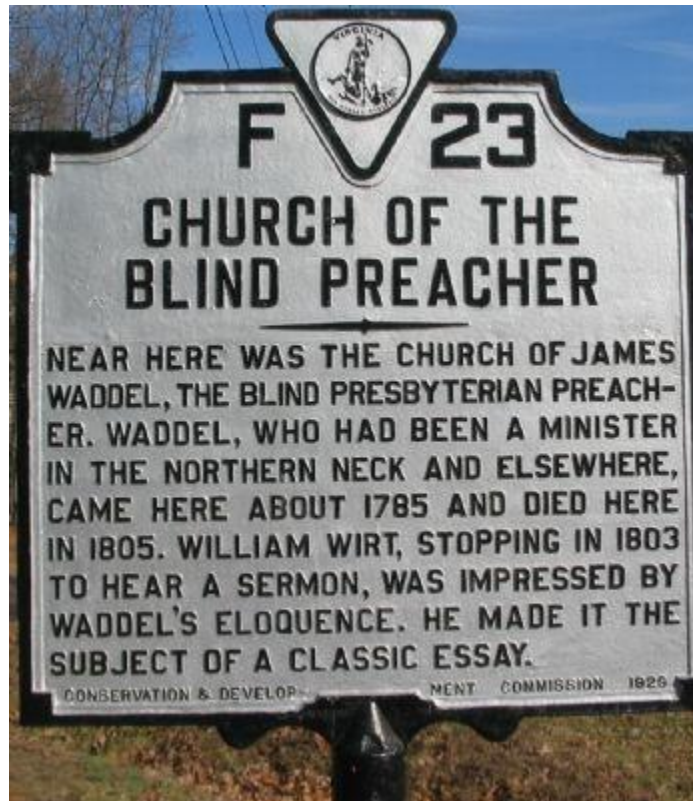
⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Thomas, 4.

¹¹ Waddell

*enunciation, and his voice of affecting, trembling melody; you are to remember the pitch of passion and enthusiasm to which the congregation were raised; and then, the few minutes of portentous, death-like silence which reigned throughout the house; ...*¹²

Today a highway marker and monument just outside Gordonsville on Route 15 memorializes the “Church of the Blind Preacher”. The photos are courtesy of the Historical Marker Database.¹³



¹² Thomas, 4.

¹³ Author not listed. “Church of the Blind Preacher.” *The Historical Marker Database*, Google, Accessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=4766>



The Monument Inscription:

Waddel Monument

Near this spot
while yet primeval forest
stood the church of
the blind preacher

James Waddel

a devout man of god and a faithful
minister of the presbyterian church

Born 1739- Died 1805

Socrates died like a philosopher but
Jesus Christ like a God. From his sermon
as narrated by William Wirt.

In 1874, the Waddell Memorial Presbyterian Church was built near Rapidan. The church, named in memory of Rev. James Waddell, is considered to be the “finest specimen of Carpenter’s Gothic or Rural Gothic architecture in Virginia, according to Calder Loth, dean of the commonwealth’s architectural historians.”¹⁴ Rev. Waddell’s remains were moved from Gordonsville to a new grave in the church’s cemetery.¹⁵ One of the wooden spires from the church is on display at the Orange County Historical Society along with a painting of Waddell Memorial Presbyterian Church.



Photo credit--starexponent.com

¹⁴ Jennings, Emily, “Towering Over the Rapidan, Waddell Memorial Church is breathtaking after 145 years,” *Culpeper Star Exponent*, August 1, 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*