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PURCHASE PEOPLE AND PLACES

Murder and a Man of the Cloth

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It was Christmas Eve, 1841, in the northern part of Henry County, Tennessee, near the border of Calloway County, Kentucky and the family of Rev. Hinson Purnell (also spelled Pernell) had gone to bed for the night. Suddenly, a fire broke out behind the house. The corn crib and other outbuildings were soon fully engulfed in a raging fire. Somehow the family became aware of the fire and rushed outside. They did their best to squelch the blaze, but it was too late. The corn crop was consumed in its entirety. (*Tri-Weekly Nashville Union,* "Two Men Murdered," January 12, 1942, page 3).

Rev. Purnell and his family lived near his eldest daughter, Sarah. Widowed at a young age, Sarah was now married to Robert Johnson.(Robert Johnson, Ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/67375246/person/402108939165/facts). Hinson Purnell was a circuit riding Methodist preacher and Robert was a farmer by trade. (1840 US Census Records and Mullins, Rev. William P., *A History of South Pleasant Grove UMC 1835-1979*, Publisher and date of publication unknown, page 16)

Purnell and Johnson soon speculated that a man by the name of Charles Spencer was the perpetrator of the fire, likely using some form of incendiary. The reason the two men suspected Spencer was because the parson had recently sold him illegal quantities of his corn liquor.

Charles Spencer was a family man who had recently moved over to Calloway County, supposedly to avoid the penalties of law.

According to a *Courier-Journal* news report, on Saturday, December 25th around 9 o'clock at night a man rode up to Charles Spencer's house and inquired the way to Paine Lynn's store. As it was very cold outside, Spencer asked the man to alight and warm himself inside. As the man advanced toward the house, Spencer opened the door. The man pulled his pistol, took aim, and fired. Spencer was killed on the spot. The man dashed away on his horse and made his escape.

Suspicions of the murderer fell on Robert Johnson as the perpetrator. Once Johnson became aware of the accusations on Sunday afternoon, he fortified himself with family and friends in Rev. Purnell's house. In addition to the preacher and Johnson, Hinson Purnell, Jr., Michael Johnson, and William Kirk armed themselves ready for a standoff. They removed chink from between the logs to use the openings as ports to shoot at anyone advancing on the home.

Around 9 o'clock that night a constable was sent to Purnell's. The lawman brought several other men with him and a warrant for the arrest of Robert Johnson and any others who might be involved. Among several others that came with the lawman was William Spencer, a brother to Charles Spencer, the first man killed.

By this time, Robert Johnson had barricaded himself in Ref. Purnell's home and refused to come out. As the constable and others came toward the house, Robert Johnson singled out William Spencer and shot him, killing Spencer immediately.

Members of the posse retreated, staying hidden behind trees and brush until morning. When daylight arrived, around 40 armed men had gathered to assist in the arrest of Robert Johnson. Rev. Purnell eventually convinced his son-in-law to give up. He opened the door of

the home and Johnson was arrested with no further bloodshed. Robert was taken before Esquire Hendricks and remanded for trial. (*Courier-Journal,* "Two Men Murdered, " January 17, 1842, page 2)

While waiting for Rev. Purnell to stand trial, the leader of the Western Kentucky Methodist Conference, known then as the Presiding Elder, formed a committee to investigate the trial proceedings and report back to the church body. The men that made up the committee were peers of Rev. Hinson, Methodist preachers: Robert Whitnell, Caleb Cole, and W. Wood. They were well known and respected men of the cloth in West Kentucky and Tennessee (Methodist Conference Minutes of the Second Quarterly Meeting, May 14, 1842.)

On January 20, 1842, the Henry County Circuit Court convened for the hearing of all those who were in the house at the time of the standoff. The accused entered a plea of not guilty. A jury of 12 was empaneled and the prosecution brought forth their case. Members of the jury included: William S. Yarbrough, Smith Criddle, Daniel E. Beasley, Joseph H. B. Wilson, William Moody, Francis W. Marberry, Thomas Poindexter, Tristram H. Thomas, Franklin T. Frazier, John Swayne, Samuel C. Dunlap, and James Leeper.

John W. Crockett, the Solicitor General, with the assent of the Court, said he was unwilling to prosecute Rev. Hinson Prnell, Hinson Purnell, Jr., Michael Johnson, and William Kirk. Their case was dismissed and the State of Tennessee was to pay the costs on their behalf. The next day, January 22, 1842, Robert Johnson's trial was brought before the jury, who, upon their oaths, said they found the defendant Not Guilty and he was free to go. (Henry County, Tennessee Circuit court Minutes, January 20, 1842, Record Book 2, May 17, 1841 – September 21, 1850. "State vs. Robert Johnson, Hinson Purnell, Sr., Hinson Purnell, Jr., Michael Johnson, and William Kirk, January 20-21, 1842)

When the trial ended and the Methodist committee's investigation was completed, they reported to the full body that, although Purnell was *indirectly* involved in the murder, he was *indirectly* concerned. In other words, he was with those *that did* commit the deed and participated in the events that led up to the murder.

The committee recommended to the other members of the Methodist Conference that Rev. Purnell be deprived of his "ministerial character." On that motion, a vote was called, it carried, and the minutes reflected the order "was to spread this decision in the *Journals* of the conference." (This measure of punishment removed Purnell's rights to exercise functions of ministry, an act similar to "defrocking.")

Hinson Purnell eventually found his way back into the good graces of the Methodist Conference. The August 31, 1844, minutes from the Fourth Quarterly Meeting of the Wadesboro Circuit indicated Revs. Purnell, Luke Langston, W. Wood, D. Stewart, H. Culer, and J. Moody passed their examination of character and obtained a renewal of their clergy licenses. (Methodist Conference Minutes of the Fourth Quarterly Meeting, August 31, 1844)

Then, Rev. Hinson Purnell's "character" got him in trouble yet again. In 1846, new charges were brought against him by the Methodist Conference. This time the indictments were for unchristian conduct in gambling –betting a horse and a tract of land on the contingencies of an upcoming election. Further, he was accused of "publicly abusing the Members of this Quarterly meeting Conference in the Town of Murray on the Sabbath day." Purnell was found guilty of both charges and "the accused was excluded." (Mullins, Rev. William P., *A History of South Pleasant Grove UMC 1834-1979*, Publisher and date of publication unknown, page 16)

Between that event and the enumeration of the 1850 Census, Rev. Purnell moved with his family to Mississippi where he continued to preach the gospel until his death in 1875. He and

his wife, Elizabeth (Newton) Purnell, are buried at Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in Tippah County Mississippi. (Findagrave.com memorial 29538358 Hinson Purnell)

For unknown reasons, Robert and Sarah Johnson parted ways with the Purnell family. They moved with their growing family to Madison County, Alabama. Oddly enough, Sarah passed away on December 23, 1851, one day shy of the 10-year anniversary of the murder of the Spencer brothers. Robert continued living in Alabama, thought he moved about 50 miles east to Jackson County, where he died and was buried, in 1889.(Findagrave.com memorial 24651853 Robert Johnson).