

A Pioneer Among Us

Robert T. Anderson

By: William T. Turner

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Throughout the history of this county pioneers have lived among us. Each in his own way has projected the talent given and often he is not given the credit due him as the result of the shortsightedness of others. Such a pioneer lived in the current vicinity of Howell in south Christian County. Neighbors looked with doubt upon this man but in the passing years considerable merit had been given to his talent.

Robert Tompkins Anderson, minister, and teacher was born in Caroline County, Virginia, April 9, 1792. The old Virginia family of Anderson originated in Scotland and later appeared in Northumberland County, England. The first American ancestor, Richard, came over in the ship "Merchants Hope." His great grandson Garland Anderson of Hanover County Virginia was a member of the convention that met in Richmond in 1775 to elect delegates to the Continental Congress and to organize the "Virginia Line" of the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War. Garland Anderson's son John Burbridge Anderson Sr. married Martha Tompkins and were the parents of Robert Tompkins Anderson. Robert was the eldest son of nine children.

His education originated with his mother, and she taught him until he entered the classical school of Rev. Peter Nelson, an Episcopal minister. At the age of twenty-three he married his cousin Martha L. "Patsy" Lowery, and they were the parents of eight children, Peter Nelson, Elizabeth, John Richard, Benjamin Garland, William Bennett, Martha Tompkins, Cornelius, and John Boyer. About 1818 Anderson moved his family to Green County, Kentucky. In 1821 he professed religion and was baptized by Rev. William Warder. In 1828

the Anderson family moved to Adair County, Kentucky where he united with the Mount Gilead Baptist Church and there he was soon ordained to the ministry.

In 1830 he located in Russellville, Logan County, Kentucky, as a school teacher, the occupation he followed most of his life. He established a school there and conducted schools at several separate locations in the county. That same year he was called as pastor of the Pleasant Grove Church in that county. In 1832 he was called to Hopewell Church in Robertson County, Tennessee, serving until 1834 and to Keysburg Church in Logan County in 1834 until 1838. At the thirteenth Bethel Baptist Association held at Mt. Zion, Todd County, Kentucky, in 1837, Anderson was chosen clerk holding that office until his death.

Anderson accepted a call to the Baptist Church in Hopkinsville in 1838. He pastored there two Sundays per month and was thus able to take the churches at Olivet, near Garrettsburg, 1839-1852 and West Union at Belleview located in the western edge of the county from 1841-1854.

Rev. Anderson moved to Hopkinsville in 1840 where he established a school. He and his family moved to the Garrettsburg area, later known as the Howell community, in 1842 where he, along with his son, had by 1844, established yet another school not exclusive to teaching those who were then considered "deaf and dumb." Garrettsburg was a thriving community during the time of the school's operation. A post office was located there from 1833 until 1908 along with three physicians, three blacksmith shops, a hotel, a grocery and two general stores. Also, in 1842 he became the pastor of the Locust Grove Baptist Church, near Masonville on US 41-A which he served through 1847 as well as pastor of the Salem Baptist Church near Saint Elmo which he served until 1850. In 1846 Rev. Anderson organized a Baptist church at Elk Water School House (a log octagonal shaped building) located one mile west of Church Hill (now South Union Church).

It is probable that Robert Anderson was aware of the Braidwood School for teaching the deaf located in Winchester, Virginia though the purpose

behind his interest in teaching the deaf is unknown. Anderson's real claim to fame occurred during the years from 1844-1854 when he operated the first successful school for the education of the deaf in south western Kentucky, west of Danville, Kentucky, near present day Howell. The school for the deaf at Danville was established in 1823. A notice in *The Greensboro Patriot* (Greensboro, North Carolina) of March 1, 1845 announced the earliest advertisement found for his school by this speaker.

A Novel Case. – The Editor of the Louisville Courier mentions the case of a young man named Joseph D. Tisdale of Indiana, who was born deaf and dumb, and who for the last eighteen months has been attending the school of the Rev. Robert T. Anderson, of Christian County, Kentucky. – He now pronounces quite distinctly, can read intelligibly, and is capable of making any of his wants known without recourse to the slate. The editor adds: "We have no doubt but that he will be enabled, by further application, to speak fluently. Mr. Anderson's school has been in operation for eight or ten years, and, during that time, he has taught a number of dumb persons to speak. Notwithstanding his institution is almost entirely unknown, except in the immediate neighborhood in which it is located."

The above-mentioned length of time of Andersons school by the article has been proven incorrect by extensive research by Mary S. Breckinridge. This speaker will revisit this lady and her research later.

The land on which Anderson settled was about ten miles south of Hopkinsville and a mile from present day Howell, but he was located in the Garrettsburg postal district. About a mile from his home was the small village of Genoa, a settlement of about fifty people in 1840. Genoa had an established post office from 1846 until 1854 which covered the entire period Anderson operated his school.

Anderson entered an agreement with the land owner Dr. John F. Bell and made payment from time to time in various sums of money for one hundred seventy-one acres. He paid a total of twelve hundred dollars, never receiving a receipt or deed from Dr. Bell. After Anderson's death Dr. Bell presented a bill of

twenty-three hundred dollars for the balance due on the land and for medical services to the family during that time. Bell acknowledged after Anderson died that one hundred acres had been paid for, and he deeded that acreage to Mrs. Anderson in 1862. Much of the land was in dense woods with a sizable portion of clear land planted in wheat and corn. A large profusion of fruit trees and flowers from Downer Nurseries at Fairview were planted and the farm became one of the best developed in the county. On the north side of the house a garden was planted with a flower bordered walk through the center to a summer house covered with wisteria and Virginia Creeper. On the lawn in front of the house was a magnolia tree and several Locust trees and beside the gate stood a fine old Blue pine.

Anderson, in 1850, owned ten slaves, among them was Rachel who was in charge of the laundry and cooking. Over the years there were a number of negro women hired to assist her in those duties. There were always hired negro men on the place to assist with the farm work as well as a negro livery boy who was confined to the transport of the family and visitors. Through family remembrances Rachels husband Peter was known to be the farm foreman before his death. Robert Anderson bequeathed Rachel to his wife, and she lived with the family until her death on December 15, 1890 at the advanced age of one hundred three.

The main house was built of logs. The roof was low pitched with small semicircular windows under the eaves in the front and large windows at either end. There was a hall through the middle of the house with a stairway leading up to the boy's dormitory. On the right of the hall was a large airy room used as a parlor and to the left was a similar room, the private quarters of Mr. and Mrs. Anderson. From this area there was a stairway to the girl's dormitory. The house was built up on posts raising the level of the floor some two feet above the ground allowing the chickens and ducks to nest under the house.

About two hundred feet from the house across the lawn was a log cabin which was used as a schoolhouse. The schoolhouse was equipped with an extensive library (listed in the inventory) and a set of globes. All the pupils

were taught in one large room. Above the school room was another dormitory used by the large hearing boys who came from a distance to the school. All of the deaf children and the younger hearing children slept in the main house under the immediate care of the family. In the boy's room were four large double beds and a trundle bed.

Mrs. Anderson often served as a teacher along with their daughter Elizabeth in the operation of the school. She was always so busy with the management of the house that she did not have the time to go visiting. She was said to be refined and dignified, was very quiet, and never had much to say. Visitors came from all over the country to spend a day or several days observing the school's operation. As the lady of the house Mrs. Anderson would always see that the family was presentable on all occasions. Saturdays would be days of recreation for the boarders, roaming the fields, orchard or woods or playing some games. The students were always easily managed even the grown young men would be kind to this gentle little woman.

The school acquired an excellent reputation which caused its growth and Anderson was joined in teaching by his son Cornelius Anderson. The fame of the school spread to neighboring states and students came from all over the south. By the following year they came from Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri, Indiana, Tennessee as well as nine from Kentucky. There were two sessions per year – from January 15th to July 15th and from August 15th to December 15th. Over the years of its operation there were approximately thirty students. All of the deaf children in attendance were "pay pupils." Anderson charged fifty dollars in advance for room and board for a session of five months.

The long journey to a then not easily accessible section and the expense of boarding limited the attendance. The great drawback was the brief time many of them remained, which precluded, in their cases, anything like a fair test of the method employed. The method of instruction included the teaching of sounds first and then words. Particular attention was given to the position

of the vocal chords thereby securing tone and pitch. This is the oral method. The deaf and hearing pupils recited in the same classes.

At the turn of the twentieth century Anderson's school for the deaf caught the attention of Dr. Alexander Graham Bell who always considered himself as a teacher of the deaf because his wife was so afflicted. Bell had invented the telephone while attempting to develop an amplification device to facilitate communication between hearing and non-hearing persons. In 1905 Dr. Bell continued an interest in the education of the deaf as he prepared a series of articles pertaining to the various schools that had been established across the country in the interest of teaching speech to the deaf, one of which was Robert T. Anderson's school in Christian County.

Alexander Graham Bell employed a noted Kentuckian Miss Mary S. Breckinridge to travel to Christian County in search of any information and documentation about the school. We are indebted to her research coming at a vital time when the generations who were knowledgeable about the school were nearing the end of their lives. She traveled from Hopkinsville to New Providence Tennessee to interview a granddaughter of the Andersons. There she found the Ambrotypes of Robert T. and his wife. These were copied by Anderson's nephew, Hopkinsville photographer Clarence Anderson. Before you are copies of photographs of this couple.

Materials gathered by Miss Breckinridge were sent to Alexander Graham Bell and he deposited them in the Volta Bureau in Washington D. C. That agency remains today as a museum dealing with impaired hearing.

Anderson made two visits back to Virginia to see his relatives. He first returned between 1847 and 1850 when he made a visit to his brother Dr. Benjamin Anderson at "Oak Hill" in Caroline County and while there he preached one Sunday afternoon to a congregation of the neighbors. The Anderson's traveled to Virginia by public conveyance for the second visit in 1853. It is probable on the last trip that he and his wife posed for a photographer to "strike their likeness." It was said of him that he was a man who was a magnificent and imposing preacher. He was not so handsome of

face and had rather course features. His manners and his smile were irresistible with a magnetism that drew everyone to him.

Though his physical frame was remarkably strong and though in his sixty-third year, he appeared in good health but during the bitter winter of 1853 into early 1854 he conducted a lengthy revival at Pleasant Grove, a church he had established in the late 1840's in Caldwell County. The meeting continuing for several weeks. During this revival he contracted a severe cold that would turn into neuralgia in his right arm. This disease gradually moved to his head and located over his right eye, ultimately resulting in apoplexy of which he died at his home on June 8, 1854. He was buried on his farm and the grave was marked with a six-foot marble obelisk. Today its location is east of the intersection of Highways 117 and 345 just north of Howell. Anderson's school was closed upon his death.

His will was registered at the court house in Hopkinsville on April 2, 1855. It reads as follows - Will Book P Page 253.

"In this my last will and testament made the second day of April, 1853, I desire that all my property, the tract of land on which I now live and a small tract of timber land in Flat Lick, my negro woman Rachel, my horses and cows and hogs, with all else belonging to me after my debts are, and shall be the property of my wife during her lifetime to have and to hold at her death to be divided among my children equally provided always that Jack Brame who is the husband of my daughter Elizabeth, shall not have in his possession any part or parcel of the property belonging to me because of his intemperance, but it shall be secured to my daughter Elizabeth for her and her children's benefits and I appoint Dr. John F. Bell and my son Peter N. Anderson my administrators to carry into effect the will and testament, as witnessed my hand and seal this second day of April, 1853.

Robt. T. Anderson (seal)

In addition to the above it is my wish that my sister Lucy B. Smith enjoy the use of the place which she is improving with land enough for a good yard & garden & a lot, say four acres in all, and that she shall not be interrupted in the enjoyment of the same for at least ten years. {Witness my hand}.

Robt. T. Anderson

Inventory set aside for the use of his widow. Will Book P Page 166

1 work horse	half dozen cups and saucers
1 plow and gear	1 coffee pot and tea pot
1 axe	1 table
1 hoe	1 family bible
2 cows and calves	1 side saddle and bridle
2 beds and furniture	6 chairs
1 spinning wheel	40 lbs. pork
1 pot and oven	25 barrels corn
half dozen plates	

Dec. 16, 1854

Inventory of the estate of Robert T. Anderson - Will Book P Page 21

1 lot of plows	1 scythe and cradle and mowing blade
2 mattocks	
1 lot of wedges	1 lot of tinware
1 cultivator	1 lot of tubs
1 lot of wire	1 lot of weeding hoes
1 grindstone	1 lot of ---- hogs
1 lot of barrels and tubs	1 lot of stock
1 tin lard stand	2 milk cows
2 ovens and pot	1 farm wagon
1 lot of jars	1 wheat fan
1 cooking stove	1 sorrel horse
1 lot of cooking vessels	1 bay mare
2 kitchen tables	1 culling blade and tar bucket
	4 sets gear

1 cottage stove	1 bureau
1 sorrel mare	1 dining table
1 stack of oats	1 table
1 flock of geese	11 chairs (stool)
1 lot cupboard ward	10 split bottom chairs
1 press	1 looking glass
1 chest	2 Mississippi maps
7 feather beds	1 Mitchell's US map
1 clock	1 map of the ancient world
1 book case and bureau	1 gun
1 secretary	
Astronomical apparatus	
Dr. Gill's Commentary of the Bible 9 volumes	
Nicholson's Encyclopedia 12 volumes	
Ferguson's Works	
Sears Pictorial History of Britain	
Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge	
Goldsmith's Animated Nature	
Allison's History of Europe	
Josephus Works 3 volumes	
Central America (Stephen's & Hampell & Rice)	
Cyclopedia of History	Harris Works
Goldsmith's England and Rome	Malcolm's Travels
McCanley & Gibbon	Macozs Works & Works on Baptism
Encyclopedia of Geography	Wilson & Brown
D. Aubique Works 5 volumes	Tanner's Atlas
Bollars History 2 volumes	Christian Library
Wealth of Nations	1 man's saddle
Fuller's Work	1 gold watch
Darby's Gazetteer	1 brown mare
Davidson's Conversion	2 shovels and tongs
Frey's Works	Colored servant "Rachel"
Geological Works	Interest in negro woman Polly and
Durben & Sears	boy Maxey
History of Mexico	1-barrel Hzdranlie lime
Expedition to Dead Sea	
1 spinning wheel	

18 pounds of feathers
1 small table
1 valise

August 28th, 1854

The best testimony as to the value of Anderson's teachings came from former students. One said, "It is true that many failed to learn to talk but this may have been due to the brief time they stayed in the school. Still, I must say his efforts were successful." Another said, "Though they spoke haltingly their speech was usually understandable." As judged by its pupils the school was a success.