

375 SEMPLE, ROBERT B. – [REV. ROBERT BAYLOR SEMPLE, D.D.]

Publisher

Richmond

Author & publisher of an 1810 history of Virginia Baptists using the Richmond press of John O. Lynch (273); also author & publisher of an unrecorded 1809 Baptist catechism.

Semple was a revered figure among Baptists in eastern Virginia during the early-Republic era. As a leader both of the Dover Association in Virginia's Northern Neck and of the Baptist General Convention of Virginia, he helped shape the church's direction for over forty years, and so contributed to its rapid growth in those years.

Publishing was a part of his ministry, whether as the circular letters attached to the minutes of annual ministerial meetings, as the correspondence he contributed to various journals and magazines, or as the two books he wrote and published in his lifetime. The first of those books issued in 1809, a catechism for children, has not survived, so its title and the press he employed are unknown; however the Dover Association endorsed the work in their annual meeting and recommended its use as a way to introduce Baptists principles to children of the families then members of that association. His second book is far less obscure, having been reprinted at least twice in the nineteenth century, making it readily accessible to modern readers. Semple's *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* issued from the Richmond job-press of John O. Lynch in 1810; the text quickly became a historical standard, the main source for many subsequent accounts of how the state's Baptist faith overcame its initial persecution in the Virginia colony to become the fastest-growing faith then in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Still, contemporaries did not consider Semple a controversialist; rather he was seen as an empathetic pastor whose charm was his most effective evangelical tool. Born in King & Queen County in January 1769, he did not stray far from his Northern Neck origins for most of his life. As an adolescent, Semple came under the influence of one William Skelton, who persuaded him to abandon his Anglican/Episcopal upbringing to follow the Baptist faith. He was baptized by Elder Theodorick Noel in December 1789 at the Upper King & Queen church; by September 1790, he was ready for ordination as a minister, accepting a call to lead the newly-established Bruington Church, also in King & Queen County. Semple fast became a missionary figure in the nearby reaches of Virginia, helping found the Virginia Missionary Society and the Richmond Foreign and Domestic Mission Society, as well as contributing to the efforts of Baptist elder John Courtney to support the mission of the American Colonization Society in Virginia. He was also a member of the first meeting of the Baptist General Convention, and attended each session until 1830. As a result, Semple was often considered for leadership of educational institutions that were founded on the ideal of missionary evangelicism; in 1805, he was offered and declined the presidency of Transylvania College (now University) in Lexington, Kentucky, as the post would take him away from his customary responsibilities; but in 1827, he did accept a similar post at the Columbian College in Georgetown, District of Columbia (today the George Washington University) because of its proximity to his Northern Neck duties.

Semple still held that position, as well as the pastorate of the Bruington Church, when he died on Christmas Day 1831, fittingly a Sunday as well.

Personal Data

Born: Jan. 20 1769 Rosemount, King & Queen County, Virginia.
Married: Mar.1 1793 Ann Lowry @ Caroline County, Virginia.
Died: Dec. 25 1831 Woodlawn, near Fredericksburg, Virginia.
Children: James (b. 1794); John Walker (d. 1822); Robert Baylor Jr. (b. 1805);
Martha (b. 1806); William Monroe (b. 1808); Lucy Ann (b. 1813).

Sources: Imprint (S&S 21322); Taylor, *Virginia Baptists*; Harris, *Old New Kent County*.