

## Ireland Poisoning

A most interesting person during the early years in Shenandoah County was the Rev. James Ireland, a native of Edinburgh, Scotland, and a successful and charismatic Baptist preacher in the Valley. Historian John Wayland relates in his book, "A History of Shenandoah County", that in 1768 Ireland taught school near New Market, then called Cross Roads. Not long after, he acquired credentials as an itinerant preacher. For many years, he preached and lived at various area locations including Smith Creek, Rockingham, Fauquier, Woodstock, Strasburg, Cedar Creek and Waterlick. By the early 1790s he lived near Springdale in Frederick Co. with his family.

In June 1792 Betsy Southerlin, a woman living with the Ireland's, along with the aid of a family servant, attempted to poison them, using arsenic. A full account of the crime from an 1819 book stated that after eating a late breakfast, various family members and guests complained of severe digestive discomfort. Rev. Ireland, his six year old daughter, Jenny, three year old son, William, his brother in law and several other guests felt ill to differing degrees. During the following night, young William died. He was then discovered to have large black spots on his body. Rev. Ireland suffered terrible reaction to the poison, but survived, as did all the others affected.

It was first suspected that the arsenic had been present in the sugar cask, which Rev. Ireland had, that very day, acquired at Stoverstown (now Strasburg). That proved not to be the case and it was found that Betsy had actually hidden the poison in the bread served at breakfast. Both Betsy and the servant, Sucky, quickly confessed. Both however were acquitted of charges, apparently because Rev. Ireland refused to vigorously pursue the prosecution. It is said that he was reluctant to subject his young daughter, Jenny, to the ordeal of appearing as witness at trial. The accused stated that they applied the poison at the instigation of a third person; yet neither that nor the reason for the act are known even now.

Rev. Ireland continued as a preacher and was pastor of the Baptist congregations at Buck's Marsh, Happy Creek and Water Lick in Frederick and Shenandoah counties at the time of his death in 1806.