

Reverend Henry Davidson (1823-1903): Maintaining and Creating Boundaries

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“It is painful to say yes, but how can I say no?”¹ Henry Davidson’s response to his daughter Frances’s announcement in the mid-1890s of her call to pioneer in the Brethren in Christ (River Brethren) fledging mission project articulates his struggle. A trailblazer himself, he was among the most ardent of supporters of missions in the denomination. In his latter mid-life years, Davidson had also broken ground with the launch of a denominational paper, the *Evangelical Visitor*. He had used the paper to bring together the far reaches of the mobile late nineteenth-century community and to broadcast the denomination’s version of the gospel message well beyond the sectarian community’s borders. Recently, he had been coerced into giving over the reins of editorship of the nine-year-old paper. Newly bereaved by the death of his wife and Frances’s mother, his words reflected deep conflict. His loss would be multiplied as his beloved daughter stepped forward, the first to volunteer to explore the potential of an overseas missionary enterprise. At the same time, his response demonstrates integrity and hints at his reputation as a calm, objective, visionary leader.

Frances Davidson’s twenty-four year career in South and South Central Africa has been well documented.² While researching her pre-Africa days, I have found myself increasingly drawn to her father, especially in his role as founding editor of the *Evangelical Visitor*. In a surprising gender reversal, far more is known about his daughter than this significant male leader, despite his role in launching what quickly became a bi-weekly transnational periodical that survived for over 125 years.

Unlike Frances, who published a missionary memoir, kept journals, and even penned articles for the *Evangelical Visitor* itself, Henry appears to have written little, other than editorials and administrative pieces related to the paper and denominational meetings. Even his burial place has been forgotten.³

Despite the fog that obscures this significant leader's ministry, spanning the latter half of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth, it is clear that Henry Davidson's story makes a significant contribution to the transnational history of evangelical Christianity, in the United States and Canada to be sure, but also in global Christianity.⁴ "Devoted to the spread of evangelical truths and the unity of the church" as proclaimed in *Evangelical Visitor's* masthead, Davidson brought the Brethren in Christ into the world of communication so important to the shaping of nineteenth-century institutions and movements.⁵ With his vision and even-headed leadership, his was the driving force in converting a separate people to the use of contemporary tools of communication that fostered community in the context of late nineteenth-century geographic expansion and mobility.⁶ This essay is a preliminary probe into what I hope will become a larger exploration of the ways in which Davidson's story pushes geographic and community boundaries, including gendered norms of the time.

Davidson's studio photograph, done in upper mid-life, gives valuable clues into this leader's personality. The astute observer sees intense eyes peering out from under bushy dark eyebrows and a heavy thatch of wavy snow-white hair riding mid-ear. His hairless upper lip is symbolic of the pacifism of the denomination; meanwhile, his well-trimmed beard partially covers a dark bowtie, suggesting an independent spirit setting him apart from the plain dressing sect. Indeed, his apparel reinforces questions that his English name among a primarily Germanic community raises. Overall, Davidson's portrait suggests a strength that had the potential for conflict; at the same time, it engenders a sense of confidence.⁷

Davidson's obituary, published in *Evangelical Visitor* following his death in October 1903, tells readers that he was of Scottish ancestry, the first generation of the family to be American born. Birthed on 15 April 1823, in Westmoreland county, south-western Pennsylvania, he was the grandson of Robert Davidson, who, with his wife (typically, unnamed in the historical record), was among the "steady stream" of tens of thousands of Scots-Irish pushed to emigrate from Ireland by economic challenges and

religious oppression.⁸The most widely scattered of all the colonists, large numbers of Scots-Irish, the majority Presbyterian, responded to William Penn's invitation to religious groups and settled in Pennsylvania.⁹There they established themselves, to quote historian William Sweet, amongst "Mennonites, Dunkers, Moravians, Schwenkfelders, Lutherans, German and Dutch Reformed, several varieties of Presbyterians, Welsh and English Baptists, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, with no one group having an actual majority."¹⁰

A clergyman, Henry's grandfather Robert Davidson was placed in Philadelphia.¹¹From the outset, colonial Presbyterians set high standards for education among their ministers. Colonists frequently had been trained at Scottish universities. We can assume that Robert Davidson was among these because only the well educated were put into parishes.¹²With the Presbyterian support of George Whitefield and colonial evangelicalism, Henry's grandfather may well have been among the converted, many of whom are known to have been pastors.¹³

Whatever the case, Henry's father Jacob Davidson was likely a child when the family emigrated; both parents died soon after, leaving their young son and his sister Elizabeth orphaned. With the close proximity of the variety of ethnicities and religious backgrounds in Penn's woods, their adoption into what has been described as a "Pennsylvania Dutch" family is not surprising.¹⁴And yet, it did put Henry's family into a situation where the marked differences in temperament and tradition between the "impetuosity" and "restlessness" of the Scots-Irish and the Germans "who, once they found a home, tended to remain fixed," would at times be problematic, if also beneficial.¹⁵

In due course, Jacob married Mary Young; they affiliated with the German Baptists (later United Brethren in Christ, not to be confused with Brethren in Christ). Unlike the Brethren in Christ who emerged in Pennsylvania, the former had originated in central Germany.¹⁶By 1815, when the "vague and undefined" membership in the United States officially declared itself a denomination, the thirty-three-year-old Jacob Davidson had become a German Baptist minister, and he was among the decision makers that solidified their status as United Brethren in Christ.¹⁷

Henry arrived in the family, eight years later, in 1823. Although he was well down the line, the fourth and last son in a family of eight children, Henry showed promise. He was ordained by the time he was twenty-three years old. By that point, the family lived in Brownsville, Pennsylvania, in a former tavern converted into their grand home. An

extensive landowner, Jacob was prominent in town. For instance, he was appointed as director at the local Monongahela Bank. He had also switched denominations. Henry followed in his father's footsteps as a minister among the River Brethren (after 1860 officially Brethren in Christ)¹⁸ who held similar values and practices to the United Brethren in Christ, including the Anabaptist influence manifested in their common pacifism and strong communities, although the former were known to be more enthusiastic in their worship.¹⁹ As W. O. Baker, the medical doctor and lay theologian who became a close friend of Henry's, put it in reflections on his mid nineteenth-century decision to convert to the River Brethren: "It was said that these brethren claimed to be possessed of the Holy Ghost. This seemed to me a high attainment. But from what I know of the word of God I believe that it ought to be so. I learned that they were generally accounted as Christians in the neighbourhood."²⁰

Preparing to leave behind the prosperity of their western Pennsylvania community, judging by its industry in ship building, for instance, and the support of a strong community, Henry modelled his Scots-Irish heritage. With his wife Hannah Radcliffe Craft at his side, Henry began what became a lifetime of following the trend of demographic mobility characteristic of the time. Henry Davidson was among the mid nineteenth-century Americans who, as historian S.J. Kleinberg has put it, "searched for land, mineral wealth, riches and a new start."²¹ When their young family joined the trek to Ohio, they were among the "more than half of the population" who had been born outside the state.²² It would be remiss not to note that Henry was as culpable as anyone who, in their quest for good farming, displaced the aboriginal people who had made their homes on these territories for millennia.²³

Hannah Craft Davidson's death not long after their move left thirty-two-year-old Henry a widower, with five small children. Henry was still young, and women's work was indispensable to the family economy. In that era, bereaved husbands often advertised for household help "with an 'unsullied reputation' who would manage the 'female concerns of country business.'" In Kleinberg's words, "[t]he list of jobs included '[raising] small stock, dairying, marketing, combing, carding, spinning, knitting, sewing, pickling, preserving, etc.' and occasionally instructing the daughters of the household in the domestic economy."²⁴ It comes as no surprise, then, that not long after Hannah's death, Henry returned to their home community in Redstone, Pennsylvania, to look for a wife. He soon proposed to a close friend of Hannah's, twenty-five-year-old Fannie Rice.

He already knew the family, and, like Hannah, Fannie came from a United Brethren in Christ clergy home; thus Henry was convinced that Fannie had the qualifications necessary to make a good wife.

It must have been a difficult decision for a young woman to take on the rigorous duties of a domestic situation that included raising five youngsters, including an infant, several days' journey from the support of family. And yet, from her side, she was already past her prime and the offer must have been tempting when faced with the possibility of spinsterhood.²⁵ Whatever Fannie's motivation may have been, Henry successfully wooed her, and she joined him in Ohio, taking over the duties of motherhood and running the domestic side of their enterprise. Eight more from this union eventually made Henry the father of thirteen, over a twenty-six-year span, well surpassing the national average of five children.²⁶

The River Brethren (Brethren in Christ) and the German Baptists (United Brethren in Christ) were both active in the Ohio communities where Davidson and his family farmed. In pioneer times these faith communities met in members' homes and barns, and as they became more established it was common for the two groups to share worship space in what they called union meetinghouses.²⁷ For the plain people, ministry was called out from the congregation, untrained and unpaid.²⁸ Thus a variety of farming operations, and, as was typical of the times, other moneymaking efforts, for instance operating a cheese factory, supplemented Davidson's preaching and evangelistic ministry through most of his life. His Scots-Irish restlessness was demonstrated in the multitude of farm purchases and moves that took the family from Bath, to Smithville, to Georgetown, while in Ohio, then in 1881 to White Pigeon, Michigan, and finally, in 1891, to Abilene, Kansas, where he had already purchased several farms to be run by his sons and others.

These latter moves were strongly motivated by Davidson's vision for a church periodical. From the mid-1870s, he joined his voice with those from Michigan and Kansas, well outside of the denomination's geographic centre in Pennsylvania, who recognized the symbiotic relationship between population mobility and the potential of assisting connectedness through the media. The promoters of a church paper were in a minority. As denominational historian Carlton Wittlinger tells readers, although, during their first century, Brethren in Christ did take advantage of the postal revolution to communicate with one another, they continued to favour meeting in person at annual conferences, local meetings, and personal visitation by leaders, to communicating by post.²⁹ Thus discussion

languished for years, only to be revived and opposed again; finally, in 1887, Davidson, his friend W. O. Baker, and a small group of other supporters were given the opportunity to test the waters in what by now had become for the majority of evangelicals in nineteenth-century America, including their co-religionists the United Brethren in Christ with their *Gospel Visitor*, an essential force in community-building. In just over three months, Davidson, now a bishop in Michigan, had the first issue published.³⁰

Research has yet to reveal the extent of Davidson's credentials for such an enterprise. With his background, and "[t]he surging levels of education and literacy in the post-Revolutionary era," he would have been schooled, certainly, in the basic three Rs.³¹ His fast friendship with William Baker, the medical doctor cited earlier, who, alongside his medical practice, devoted much time to thinking theologically about the doctrines of the sect as it evolved into a denomination, suggests that Henry, too, was gifted with a strong intellect, and may have had the opportunity of higher education.³² In an editorial penned in June 1893, for instance, Davidson described Baker thus: "his reasoning powers make his sermons 'needed and appreciated.'"³³

Perhaps an even stronger indicator of Davidson's support for higher education was his decision nearly fifteen years earlier to follow the contemporary cultural trend favouring women's higher education, in the face of a denominational prohibition against women speaking publicly. Following Baker's lead, Davidson supported his daughter Frances in her desire to join William Baker's daughter Anna at the newly established United Brethren in Christ Ashland College.³⁴

Feminist historians stress that gender is essential to a fuller understanding of the past. They say that in a world where gender strictly separated men's and women's worlds, it was women who were the primary educators and nurturers of children, both boys and girls, practically, but also intellectually and spiritually; girls learned what it meant to be women from their mothers, and they made meaning based on what they read.³⁵ Indeed, historians of women have argued that by the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, American culture had become feminized, in Kleinburg's words, "as women increasingly dominated the cultural marketplace and comprised about four-fifths of the reading public."³⁶

An editorial early in Davidson's tenure as editor of *Evangelical Visitor* places his family among the American reading public. They, too, subscribed to and absorbed "family friendly" papers that had emerged

during his lifetime.³⁷ Frances Davidson's decision to pursue higher education suggests her mother Fannie's strong influence. Gendered analysis raises other tantalizing questions. How much did Fannie Davidson influence her husband Henry's use of his editorial license to cross gendered boundaries to publish a variety of articles that favoured girls' education, texts that cited women's writings, and a multitude of pieces penned by women themselves, including his own daughters?³⁸

In his role as editor, Davidson could potentially influence the burgeoning denomination in a way heretofore unknown. "[D]evoted to the spread of evangelical truths and the unity of the church," Davidson gave many voices opportunities to share their testimonies, including dramatic conversion stories, in print.³⁹ Here, as was typical of the literary culture of the late-nineteenth century, many women, along with a smattering of men, responded to what they regarded as their duty to write.⁴⁰ A column devoted to "our dead" even gave death bed opportunities for testifying and warning the living; take, for instance, the ten-year-old girl whose extreme piety was published as an exemplary model for young women.⁴¹

Davidson's leadership provided much more than evangelical testimonies, however. Under his editorship, the paper provided a forum for teaching with doctrinal expositions, sermons, and evangelical exhortations on a large range of topics, including the ordinances of baptism, communion, and foot washing, peace and non-resistance, and separation from the world. Morals told through story and poetry provided a literary component, often explicitly aimed at youth. Detailed reminiscences helped to create historical memory. And for many, the opportunities to write, and to send in articles they had selected from other religious sources, and to read the experiences of others, provided that sense of home that papers had long given an American mobile population, many of whom found themselves far from family and community.⁴²

Under Henry Davidson's leadership, *Evangelical Visitor* became an institution that thrived for well over a century, linking the Brethren in Christ community in the United States from east to west, and north to Canadian churches in Ontario and Saskatchewan. Henry's strong support of missions also took the denomination to far parts of the globe, including South Africa, northern India, and Japan. *Evangelical Visitor* provided a link for missionaries such as his daughter Frances, already in 1898 on her station in the Rhodesias (Zambia and Zimbabwe).

Meanwhile, in fall 1894, a mere three years after their move to Kansas, tragedy again struck the Davidson family. Henry's second wife

and the mother of his large family succumbed to cancer. As daughter Frances put it in her journal, without mother's presence, home was no more. The family scattered, including Davidson himself who, stripped of his editorial duties by the denomination two years after Fannie's death, moved back east to Pennsylvania and married for a third time.⁴³ His wife was Kate Brennehan, a professional woman two decades his junior, who had been a co-founder of Messiah Home for the Aged at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Davidson was now in his mid-seventies, and he had seven final years of ministry. This included leadership in the Messiah Home, a final pastorate in Ohio, and on-going committee work, including chairing the Board of Foreign Missions.⁴⁴

As readers may anticipate, Davidson's strong leadership and vision ruffled feathers. And yet, ironically, despite his restless Scots-Irish spirit, he was known as "The Peacemaker" for his calm handling of discussion," and he served as Moderator of international conference sessions up until his death in 1903.⁴⁵ The eulogy penned by George Detwiler, editor of *Evangelical Visitor* at the time of Henry Davidson's death, says it well:

He had his share of sorrows and hardships and struggles. We need not think, occupying the prominent place he did, that he had the praise of everybody. The Apostle Paul makes use of the expression, 'men of like passions' and we know that Elder Davidson did not claim for himself perfection. He had his weaknesses and no doubt made many mistakes, (and who would undertake to throw the first stone!) but we believe that throughout his long career there was an honest purpose to serve the Master whose servant he had become, and to the extent of his ability, given him by God, to work for the unity, and prosperity of the church. He now rests from his labors.⁴⁶

With his vision to embrace change and his willingness to accept the personal sacrifices that such leadership demanded, Henry Davidson led the Brethren in Christ in pushing their boundaries. In his fifty-year ministry as elder, minister, and bishop, he left the heritage of a space where a far-flung people could encourage one another and could gain the benefits of community through writing and through reading the words of others. He also aided the process of putting down doctrine and belief in published form. In short, the evidence suggests that this nineteenth-century leader was instrumental in creating a more unified North American denomination, which, by the end of the century, was able to extend itself globally in international mission.

Endnotes

1. Anita Brechbill to the author, telephone conversation 24 July 2013.
2. Frances Davidson, *South and South Central Africa* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1915); H. Frances Davidson, Papers. 1881-1931, Messiah Archives.pastperfect-online.com; accessed 22 December 2014; Morris Sider, "Frances Davidson," in *Nine Portraits: Brethren in Christ Biographical Sketches* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978); and Wendy Urban-Mead, "Dynastic Daughters," in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, eds. Jean Marie Allman, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
3. With the help of the following people, the author researched and found Henry Davidson's gravesite in Wooster, Ohio. Email correspondence with Morris Sider, 22 July 2013; Glen Pierce, 23 July 2013; Susie Holderfield, 23 July 2013; the helpful staff of the Wayne County Historical Library, Wooster, Ohio provided a map of the Wooster cemetery. http://www.wcpl.info/genealogy/index.php/Main_Page
4. See *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5-6, for their emphasis on the significance of evangelicalism to the history of Christianity.
5. This history is developed in Carlton Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 1-34; see also *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies*, 9, for the significant role of communication in shaping nineteenth-century evangelicalism.
6. See S. J. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States 1830-1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 5, for her discussion of "the grand forces shaping American life," including "the westward movement."
7. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, 47.
8. William Warren Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965; original 1942), 250-1.
9. Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America*, 252-3.
10. Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America*, 323.
11. Sources differ as to the time of emigration and Jacob Davidson's birth. According to *Evangelical Visitor* (1 April 1903), 15, Robert Davidson emigrated from Scotland in 1789, which would have made his son Jacob

seven years old. Franklin Ellis concurs: "Jacob Davidson, was born in England. When quite young his father, who was a minister of the gospel, emigrated to America, and located in Philadelphia." *History of Fayette County, Pennsylvania: with biographical sketches of any of its pioneers and prominent men*. Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co. Ebook <https://ia700408.us.archive.org/10/items/historyoffayette00elli/historyoffayette00elli.pdf>. Earl Brechbill differs, suggesting that Robert Davidson emigrated in the mid-1770s and died in 1784 ("The Ancestry of John and Henrietta Davidson Brechbill: A Historical Narrative" [Independence, KS: Robert K. Brechbill, 1973], 52).

12. Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America*, 267.
13. Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America*, 277-8.
14. Brechbill, "Ancestry," 52.
15. James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 199.
16. Galen Hochstetler, *Celebrating 150 Years of Paradise Church of the Brethren, 1841-1991* (Smithville, OH: Bicentennial Committee, 1976), 1.
17. Paul R. Fetters, *Trials and Triumphs: History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Huntington, IN: Church of the United Brethren in Christ Department of Church Services, 1984), 46 http://www.huntington.edu/uploadedFiles/UBHC/PDF_Files/trials.pdf; and Brechbill, "Ancestry," 56.
18. D. Ray Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul: The Life and Times of Dr. W.O. Baker 1827-1916* (Grantham, PA: Brethren in Christ History Society, 2004), 208.
19. *Evangelical Visitor*, 1 April 1903, 15-16; Brechbill, "Ancestry," 53-5; and "German Baptist Church Annual Council," *Wayne County Democrat*, 22 May 1872, in *Celebrating 150 Years*, 19.
20. W. O. Baker, "Reminiscences No. 1," *Evangelical Visitor*, 1 August 1887, 9; cited in Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 21-22.
21. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 133-4. See also *Celebrating 150 Years*, 22-23, for commentary on pioneering in Ohio.
22. David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 27.
23. The Wayne County History Book Committee did note this tragedy in their *History of Wayne County*, 34.

24. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 16-17.
25. In *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 34, Nancy Theriot has noted that although “marriage robbed a woman of personal power,” in the time that Fannie was born, spinsterhood was rare. Only 7.3% of women remained single (30).
26. Brechbill, “Ancestry,” 55-57; Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 140.
27. *Celebrating 100 Years*, 1; Baker, “Reminiscences No. 1,” 9; cited in Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 23.
28. “German Baptist Church Annual Council,” *Wayne County Democrat*, 22 May 1872, in *Celebrating 150 Years*, 19.
29. Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 3-4.
30. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, 258-9; Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 150-1; Fetters, *Trials and Triumphs*, 2; “German Baptist Church Annual Council,” *Wayne County Democrat*, 22 May 1872, in *Celebrating 150 Years*, 19; see also David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 2-3.
31. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 58.
32. Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 151, 157.
33. H. Davidson, “Editorial,” *Evangelical Visitor*, 15 June 1893, 184, in Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 243.
34. Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 275, 313, 347n.5, 348n.29; Sider, “Francis Davidson,” 161; and Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 156-7.
35. See, for instance, Theriot, *Mothers & Daughters*, especially 5, 21-24, 32-35, 63; Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 8; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*. (New York: Avon, 1978); and Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
36. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*. In *Healing Body and Soul*, Heisey has insisted that W. O. Baker “acknowledged the value of women's writings as much as men’s and used their material in his sermons and publications,” 276.
37. *Evangelical Visitor* (May 1888); see also Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 71, for her discussion on the women’s magazines that had emerged since 1820.

38. Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 262, 276.
39. In *Communities of Journalism*, 3, David Paul Nord, has discussed this significant potential held by periodical editors.
40. Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 32.
41. Noah Zook, *Evangelical Visitor* (November 1887).
42. Henkin, *Postal Age*, 43; *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies*, 6, 9; and Kleinberg, *Women in the United States*, 81.
43. Wayne County History Book Committee, *A History of Wayne County, Ohio* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1987), 34; Brechbill, "Ancestry," 55-58; *Evangelical Visitor*, 1 November 1894, 16; Susie Holdenfield pointed me to Fannie Rice Davidson's obituary in *Reflector*, see <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr>. She also directed me to the following: 1860 Census Family History Library Film 805050, <http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/55e.dll?db=1860>; 1880 Census Family History Library Film 1255077 <http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/55e.dll?db=1880>
44. Ray Zercher, *To Have a Home: The Centennial History of Messiah Village* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Messiah Village, 1995), 33, 89; Brechbill, "Ancestry," 58; and George Detweiler, "Elder Henry Davidson," *Evangelical Visitor*, 1 April 1903, 3.
45. Brechbill, "Ancestry;" and Heisey, *Healing Body and Soul*, 156.
46. Detweiler, "Elder Henry Davidson," 3.