

## Benjamin Rush Floyd's Defense of his Catholic Faith

Benjamin Rush Floyd (1811-1860) was the sixth child and fifth son of Governor John and Letitia Preston Floyd. He was born at Smithfield or perhaps the nearby Solitude. He was named for the founding father Dr. Benjamin Rush, under whose direction his father had studied medicine. (See "The Christiansburg Baby and the Founding Father" linked in the Table of Contents of this website.

Benjamin Rush Floyd graduated with an A.B. degree with first honors from Georgetown University in 1832 and received a masters' degree there in 1836. He practiced law in Tazewell (where in 1839 he was the first Commonwealth's Attorney of that county) and other counties. He and his wife (Nancy Mathews) lived in Wytheville. He represented Wythe and Pulaski Counties in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1846-47 and served in the Virginia Senate 1857-58. He lost a race for Congress in 1858.

In 1852 he was defeated in an election for judge of the Circuit Court "because he was a member of the Roman Catholic Church."

He is reputed to have been "an able lawyer and brilliant orator... [and] a fearless defender of state's rights." He died in Washington, DC, "where he had gone in the interests of a railroad of which he was the president." His widow lived in Lynchburg after his death.

On February 14, 1852, in a letter included here below, J. Pepper of Locust Grove wrote to Floyd as a candidate for circuit court judge saying in part: "There is a report in circulation in this county that you are a Roman Catholic in Religion, which I find will have a very bad effect on your election ...."

On February 20, 1852, replied to Pepper in a stirring letter telling that in becoming a Catholic he had only done what others had or should have done: "exercised my own reason and pursued my own conscience."

When JG first read this document, a year or two ago, he was reminded of his freshman college year in 1959 when the candidacy of John F. Kennedy for the presidency of the United States was defended along similar lines.

Jim Glanville, 29 August 2014

### Citations

Ambler, Charles H., ed. "Benjamin Rush Floyd," pp. 105-115 in *The John P. Branch Historical Papers of Randolph-Macon College*, volume 4, ed. Charles H. Ambler. Department of History, Ashland College (Printed by the Richmond Press), 1913.

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Stevens, Pat M. "A Genealogist's Sketch of Benjamin Rush Floyd." On line at <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=stevensp&id=I00139>. Examined 29 August 2014.

Pepper, J. "Letter from J. Pepper to Benjamin Rush Floyd, from Locust Grove, 14 February 1852," p. 109 in John Johnston, "The Sons of Governor John Floyd," pp. 78-115 in *The John P. Branch Historical Papers of Randolph-Macon College*, volume 4, ed. Charles H. Ambler. Department of History, Ashland College (Printed by the Richmond Press), 1913.

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Glanville, Jim. Unpublished work.

“Locust Grove,  
Montgomery County, Va., Feb. 14, 1852.

Mr. B. R. Floyd: Dear Sir—As I understand that you are a candidate for the office of Circuit Court judge for this district, I take the liberty of addressing you a few lines on the subject. There is a report in circulation in this county that you are a Roman Catholic in religion, which I find will have a very bad effect on your election, unless you can clear it up to the satisfaction of the people, as they say that one of the tenets of the Catholic doctrine is, that you may do what you please, and the priest will forgive their sins for a few dollars. Now, my dear sir, if you can satisfy the people on this subject, please to let me know, that I may contradict the report in time; and come to the Montgomery court as soon as suits your convenience, and then you can give a full explanation of the matter. Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. PEPPER”.

John Johnston, 1913  
“The Sons of Governor John Floyd.”

**John Johnston, 1913**  
**"The Sons of Governor John Floyd."**

Wythe C. H., Feb. 20, 1952.

J. Pepper, Esq.; Dear Sir—I received yours of the 14th a day or two since, and take this my earliest opportunity of replying to it. I hope you will pardon the manner I have adopted. My apology is that it will suit as an answer to the many letters I have received on the subject. I feel grateful for the kindness you have manifested in affording me the opportunity to notice the objection which has been so actively circulated against me. I had hoped the day of religious intolerance and persecution had passed, especially in Virginia, which was the first to proclaim religious liberty upon her statute book. It was a son of the Old Dominion who announced that the true qualification for office was embraced in these few words: "Is he honest? is he capable? is he faithful to the

Constitution!" All America would have denounced the sentiment if he had added: "Is he of the true religion?"

When I returned from the Convention many kind friends insisted upon my permitting my name to be used in connection with the office of judge of this circuit. I consented and was announced as a candidate. My prospects for success were flattering as my friends desired, until those opposed to me fell upon the expedient of making the election turn upon the fact that I was a member of the Catholic Church. It is the first time within my knowledge since the foundation of this government (and I sincerely hope it will be the last) that any citizen has been assailed for his religious opinions. Many of those who used it against me care but little for the consequences, if I can be defeated. Thus, my dear sir, you have no doubt heard many persons denounce my faith who were destitute of all Christian belief. You have also, no doubt, heard me assailed by really good-meaning and pious men, who can reconcile their conscience to open atheism, but cannot forgive the sin of Catholicity.

The first class of opponents are oily politicians who care not a fig for principle, but are hungering after the flesh pots. The second are condemning what they never examined; and a moment's reflection, it seems to me, ought to set them right upon so vital a question to the liberties of the people as that of "religious freedom." To such men I would ask a single question. If they were the candidates and I the voter would it be right in me to vote against them upon the ground of their religious belief alone? If any one could answer that interrogative in the affirmative, I could only pity his bigotry—or deplore his folly. The great danger, however, to be apprehended in requiring candidates to conform to any religious creed is, that conscientious men will be driven from office, and the unscrupulous hypocrite will be installed into the high places within the gift of the people. The man of seven principles—"five loaves and two fishes"—will rarely be ejected from office if it can be retained by the profession of any creed in the endless catalogue of Christian denominations.

The rule, it seems, is now to be that any one who professes the Catholic religion is unfit to hold office, is to be ostracised by his fellow-citizens and become the victim of a religious persecution! It will be a sad day for the country when religious toleration and the inestimable blessing of religious freedom is to be destroyed; when a religious test is regarded as a necessary qualification for office. The great American principle—the Jefferson rule—that which more than all other things distinguishes our form of government from all others, is the principle of religious freedom.

If the late convention had inserted a clause in the new constitution authorizing the legislators to declare a State religion, is there one man within the borders of the commonwealth who would have so far have forgotten the dignity of a freeman to have voted for it? There is but very little difference between proclaiming it by statute and enforcing it at the polls. I can perceive none but that those who would enforce it at the polls would be afraid to propose it in the halls of the legislature.

In becoming a member of the Catholic Church I have but done that which every other citizen who professes to be a member of any other Christian denomination has done, or ought to have done—exercised my own reason and pursued the dictates of my own conscience. For that I am answerable to God alone. Who is it undertakes to usurp the prerogatives of the Most High and condemn me? Am I responsible to any power but that which created me? If not, then no man has a right to thrust himself between me and my conscience—for it is a matter not for this, but “another and a better world.”

To exclude me from office does not settle the question of the truth or falsehood of my belief. The people may pronounce the stern sentence, “Never more be officer of mine,” still the question is not settled. Can such a question be settled by vote of the people? If not, why agitate it?

In my judgment every man in the district is interested in denouncing the principle of requiring a religious test. If a

Catholic is not to hold office, what shall be the religion of our officers? Shall they be Puritans, or Methodists, or Baptists—what religion may qualify them for office? At last it will be the creed of that denomination which is strongest! Then what will become of the great principle of religious freedom? The candidate must profess opinions he may not believe; the hypocrite will assume the sanctity of the saint, and the most unscrupulous knave will be the most honored by the voice of the people! For myself, I cannot consent to be made a party to the establishment of any such principle. I have preferred to withdraw my name from the canvass rather than seek or accept office on the terms it is now proposed to confer the judgeship of this circuit.

You say, "They say that one of the tenets of the Catholic doctrine is 'that they may do what they please and the priest will forgive their sins for a few dollars!'"

Do you suppose any of your neighbors who seriously think that such is one of the tenets of the Catholic Christian could be induced to believe such a piece of ridiculous nonsense? If not, does he suppose a Catholic would be more easily imposed upon than himself? It would be no small degree of self-delusion to suppose that Catholics are less informed or more bereft of common sense than other persons. I am surprised, therefore, that any person, however low in the scale of ordinary intelligence, would be so credulous as to suppose any Christian would believe such trifles.

I know in this money-seeking, money-loving age the triumph of the "almighty dollar" has been shouted from Maine to California; but however potent it may be to buy golden opinions or gild vice amongst men, I did not imagine that even the "father of lies would attempt to buy forgiveness of sin from the Almighty, whose province alone it is to forgive our transgressions. I cannot conceive a sentiment more detestable or less calculated to impose upon any one who for a moment would think of its folly. If you will just turn to the eighth chapter of the Acts, nineteenth and twentieth verses, you will see what a Catholic thinks of the attempt to

purchase the gifts of God with money: "May thy money perish with thee, because thou hast esteemed the gift of God to be purchased with money." The very thought of such an iniquity condemned the criminal!

This is only one of a hundred similar stories, equally groundless, equally ridiculous, which are daily circulated of the Catholic religion. Nothing seems too absurd to find some one to credit it. Really there appears to be a high order of imaginative talent necessary to invent all the varied and fantastic tales that are daily circulated with bated breath and mysterious grimaces, as another and recent discovery of the abominations of Popery! And what surprises me more than all this is the fact that no one ever examines for himself what is and what is not Catholic doctrine. It is to condemn without trial and to execute without mercy! In listening to and giving credence to all this ridiculous array of absurdities, persons forget or seem to forget that multitudes of the wisest, best and greatest men of the world have been members of the Catholic church—they forget that Lafayette, at the head of a Catholic army stood side by side with Washington and his patriot troops and drove the Protestant army of England from the soil of Virginia; they forget that a more upright, just or learned jurist never graced the American bench than the present amiable and pious Catholic chief justice of the United States. A man who holds his office by the appointment of Jackson and the confirmation of the American Senate—they forget that these facts are wholly incompatible with the absurdities attributed to Catholics. I have said more on this subject than I had intended when I commenced this reply; but the magnitude of the principle must be my apology. I care nothing for office, certainly for none which can only be obtained on the terms of adhering to any church whatever. But as a Virginian, as a man who is free and wishes to remain so, I denounce this attempt to add a new, unjust, and dangerous element to the excitements and passions of popular elections. As we are starting on a career of popular supremacy, it is all important that we should lay down

a correct chart, by which we are hereafter to be guided. Such a rock as this in the sea of popular excitement will wreck the vessel of "Popular Freedom," because it is the sure precursor of church government. Respectfully, your obedient servant,

BEN. RUSH FLOYD.