



Benjamin Purnell and The House of David by Glen Haney

From a farm boy Benjamin Purnell rose to be an itinerant preacher, jack-of-all-trades, founder of a religious cult and finally absolute spiritual and temporal ruler of his own little domain. As he reached the pinnacle of his power and influence, his health declined, dissension appeared in his band of followers, and litigation which had been piling up for many years descended on him.

Benjamin Purnell was born March 27, 1861 to Madison and Sarah Ann (Ross) Purnell. The exact location of his birth place is still in question. Most official sources say he was born in Mason county Kentucky. In the book Carter County History, author George Wolfford gives the claim to somewhere around Carter City, Ky. In an interview given by Benjamin's brother Elijah in 1927 he declared that the birthplace was in Foxport, Fleming County, Ky. However, inasmuch as father Madison is listed in the 1860 census of Lewis County and again in 1870 with 8 year old Benjamin, I think it is safe to give the nod to Lewis County.

Purnell had very little formal schooling and according to his first wife Angline Brown whom he married in Greenup County at age 16, he was "*shiftless and liked to lay around in the sun and eat and sleep*". In two years he deserted her and their newborn daughter. "*He just went away and stayed fifty years*", Angline said. In 1880 Benjamin married Mary Stallard, daughter of James and Wiinie, of Smokey Valley near Olive Hill, Ky. By his own admission Purnell did not divorce his first wife because he thought it was unnecessary. (as it turns out there was a law on the books at the time, stating that if a party under 18 walked away from a marriage the marriage was null. Purnell maintained that he was under 18 when he went away.)

Purnell and Mary lived in Olive Hill and vicinity while he honed his new found calling as a preacher. After a few years his acclaim as a preacher had spread and he was called to preach all around Carter County and the surrounding counties. In time he procured a covered wagon in which he and Mary assumed a nomadic life going throughout Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana as Purnell pursued his calling. Sometime around 1895 Purnell and Mary knocked on the door of the "Prince" Michael K. Mills "Flying Rollers" colony in Detroit where they were admitted as members. It was there that Purnell absorbed the ideas upon which he would later found his own colony. Purnell's skill as a preacher was soon bringing into the fold many converts. He moved up in ranks and became an important officer in the cult. But, when the "Prince" was tossed in jail for mistreating colonists Purnell and Mrs. Mills disagreed about control of the colony. A cult cannot have more than one master thus Purnell and Mary were cast out along with a handful of other members who sided with them.

The exiled group moved to Fostoria, Ohio. It was not easy going. Money was very tight and Benjamin and Mary lost their young daughter in an accident from which Benjamin was slow to recover from the shock. So say that he never did. He altered his appearance to one that resembled Jesus. He claimed to have dreamt that a white dove had perched on his shoulder and told him that he was the sixth son



of the House of David. The dove told him that it was his mission to unite the Lost Tribes of Israel in advance of Judgment Day.

In a another dream it was next revealed to him that he and his followers should move to the small town of Benton Harbor, Michigan. So, in 1903 they left Fostoria. In Benton Harbor the small group banded together with several more of "Prince" Mills followers and formed "The Israelite House of David, the New Eve, the Body of Christ". Celibacy, vegetarianism, and abstinence from alcohol and tobacco was the law.

The years brought prosperity and an Increasing membership and soon the colony and especially grew wealthy. There was an amusement park, farms, factories, theatres, restaurants, hotels, gas stations and even an Oldsmobile auto dealership.

In addition to missionary recruiting for the group, a novel plan was employed that would not only gain converts but serve as yet another source of revenue. The most popular sport in



America at the time was baseball. Why not form a traveling baseball team it was thought. Indeed, were it not for the talented bearded teams that were fielded over the next twenty years the cult may have simply faded away as another footnote in history. But, the House of David baseball team kept them in the headlines. The team traveled to nearly every state in the Union, Mexico, and most of the Canadian Provinces. In big cities and small towns they played to full stadiums. They often were

matched up, and beat local all star teams. They played against, and matched up well, against many of the formidable Negro League teams: the Pittsburgh Crawfords, the Bacharach Giants, the Newark Eagles, and the Homestead Grays. Several ex- major league players played for them, the most notable being Grover Cleveland Alexander. They also had under contract Jackie Mitchell, the first woman to ever sign a professional baseball contract. Still later would come a semi- professional basketball team as well as a women's baseball team. The last year that the House of David had a traveling team was 1936 however many home games were still played at their home field in Benton Harbor and attracted many fans. Another team called the City of David continued to tour until the middle fifties.⁽¹⁾ This team had developed through a fracture in the group in 1930. More on that later.

Membership in the House of David grew, many members coming from as far off as Australia. Business flourished and Ben and Mary lived in luxury but the followers got nothing and were compelled to surrender over to the group what possessions they might have before joining the group. The members were not allowed to own anything . Ben crowned himself King Benjamin and it was alleged, began to misuse his power and influence. Charges against him included taking advantage of the women and girls in his flock.

Morals charges were filed against him in 1910, 1914, 1919, and 1922 but were all dismissed. . The Detroit Free Press ran a series of exposés on the cult in 1923 and called for the state attorney general to act. A series of raids were made on the colony grounds to arrest Purnell but he evaded capture until finally being roused from an underground chamber in his mansion.



The Purnell that immersed had vastly changed - shrunken with illness. The man who had been a dashing figure who liked to dress in white flannels, decorated with jewels was gone. The beard was now gray and the and the figure was stooped.

The allegations against Purnell was a mixed bag of morals, adultery and false imprisonment charges. That he induced and perpetuated deceit upon members of the cult by deluding members into conveying their property to him in return for fantastic and absurd promises of immortality and religious and spiritual benefits.

The ensuing court battles would go on for three years. Towards the end of the trial Purnell was brought in and out on a stretcher unable to walk. Opponents viewed it as a cheap attempt for sympathy but it was not an act, Purnell was gravely ill. Finally, in November 1927, a decision was reached by Judge Louis Fead; Purnell was guilty of the "*betrayal of women and girls of the Colony through use of the sacred aspirations of religion to gratify his lust.*" For such conduct Purnell was order to relinquish title to the House of David the judge decreed. In short, he was banished. The order applied only to Purnell not Mary or any of the other cult members. Judge Fead left the door open for further criminal charges against Purnell and the others including what he believed been many instances of perjury by some of the members attempting to cover up for Purnell.

But now, Purnell was about to play his last trump card; on December 16, 1927 he up and died. Suddenly, the spotlight was off of the drama surrounding the trial and verdict and, instead, focused on a different target-the cults predicted resurrection of their leader. After all, Purnell had preached and promised immortality, surely he could not stay dead. The 800 member cult gathered around his body for three days hoping and praying, anxiously awaiting the "King" to rise from the dead. When the resurrection failed in the time allotted by the state, the members consented to the removal of the body to an undertakers establishment for embalming.

Back in Olive Hill, Ky. there was glimmer of hope put forth by Dr. James Stallard, brother in law of the "King." It wasn't Benjamin who died on December 16 and whose body was kept on his death bed for four days while the colony faithfully waited for a resurrection. it was an old shoe cobbler of the colony who had died and whose body was substituted for Benjamin's. Dr. Stallard was once a member of the colony. Being a physician, he did the doctoring for the colony. But eventually he left and another physician Dr. Estes took his place. According to a reporter for the Carter County Herald Purnell had been laying low in Greenup County. "*Dr. Stallard left here last week returning to his home, and he said he was of the opinion that Purnell was 'pulling one' on the officials of Michigan and that at some not far distant date he and his wife would be located in another climate, and that he would not be 'King Ben,' but he would still have the same mind and action that he had here. He says he is not over 70 years of age and looks much younger, and that his wife is in fine health and looks much younger than 66 years, which is her age.*"

That story would crumble when it was determined that the Greenup County sighting was actually that of Lewis Purnell, brother of Benjamin.

It would be another four years later until House of David spokesman H.T. Dewirt would finally accept that Purnell was gone forever. Purnell's body was laid to rest at The Diamond House the huge mansion that had been the home of Benjamin and Mary. There he lies to this day.

As in most deaths in which there are huge sums of money involved the squabble over control of the colony would be intense and be litigated for another three years. The holdings of the colony was estimated at \$10,000,000(2). In the end, the group would be halved with control to the House of David given to a group of Trustees headed by H.T. Dewirt. Mary would lead a new group called Mary's City of David. Both groups endured and continue today. Mary passed away in 1953 at the age of 91. In recent years their membership has declined to just a handful of faithful who toll faithfully to maintain their way of life. Many of the beautiful buildings in the community remain.



I want to balance this story by stating saying that my personal sentiment is that much of the wrong doing supposedly perpetrated by Benjamin is fabrication. He was very successful and made a lot of money which inevitably breeds discord and jealousy which in turn led to his downfall. All of the House of David members were there on their own free will. Some were professional people, Doctors and lawyers among them. They were free to leave -and some did-but most were happy and content with the arrangement and enjoyed themselves with the group. There was never any coercion to join. Indeed, the House of David ball teams were told not to even talk about their religion unless they were ask about it. Yes, Benjamin was eccentric, by our standards, but not malicious. The majority of charges leveled against him over the years were from families that had been expelled from the colony and were revenge motivated. No, he was not exactly squeaky clean either. He did abandon his first family and in time let his ego run out of control. It is a pity that a man as gifted Benjamin Purnell would meet with such an ignominious fate.

Several articles about the House of David and can be found on your favorite search engine Most of them are interesting and informative but filled with inaccuracies.

(1) By June 1994 George Anderson, age 84, was the last living House of David player, and living in Florida. George and his family had come from Australia in 1920 to join the colony, and made the team by 1927 at the age of 17. He remembered Satchel Paige the best pitcher he ever saw, and Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard as great hitters. Anderson calls Cool Papa Bell, a member of the Negro League, the fastest guy who ever lived. "He could bounce it back to the pitcher, and if the pitcher hesitated only a moment, Bell would beat him to first."

George also happily recalls, "In 1932 we beat the St. Louis Cardinals 8-4 in a midseason game in their own home ballpark. We were always at about Triple-A level losing more than we won against major teams, but ever now and then we could take them." By 1956 Anderson was the last "real" member of the Davids, and called it quits at the age of 46. That curious and unusual bearded baseball team called The House of David had come and gone.

(2) Forced to vacate the "Diamond House" Mary Purnell would contend in a petition in 1928 that there was \$800,000 hidden somewhere in the house that Benjamin had squirreled away. That money was never been reported recovered.