

## Chapter 2

### Other Accounts of Cochranism

In addition to Ridlon's account of the story of Jacob Cochran and his polygamous practices and theology, other writers added their testimonies.

Among them are a number of histories of counties and towns in southern Maine where Jacob Cochran lived—from which the following excerpts are gleaned.

#### **Ephraim Stinchfield's Account Was Written during the Cochranite Craze**

A minister named Ephraim Stinchfield, who called himself "A Watchman," published a twenty-two-page booklet in 1819, detailing the activities of the Cochranites at the time that Jacob Cochran was at the height of his fame. His book is entitled *Cochranism Delineated: or, a Description of, and Specific for a Religious Hydrophobia, Which Has Spread, and Is Still Spreading, in a Number of the Towns in the Counties of York and Cumberland: District of Maine*. Stinchfield's book was published in Boston. The following is extracted from it:

While passing through the town of Scarborough [Maine], in the month of February, 1817, I . . . [was] informed . . . of a stranger, who had lately moved into the neighborhood, by the name of JACOB COCHRAN, who called himself a preacher . . . he had lately moved his family into the place, from Conway, in the State of New Hampshire. . . . [T]he report I received from this family respecting Cochran, sounded like that of an impostor. . . . I was then about to take my leave of them, when they informed me this same singular man was expected to preach at their house the fol-

lowing evening. They urged me hard to tarry . . . I at length consented. I heard him through. . . I still retained my suspicion that he was an impostor. . . I heard no more from this stranger, until the summer following when a report was in circulation, that large numbers (some said more than one thousand) had been converted under his ministry. As I was passing through Kennebunk, in the winter of 1818, I was informed . . . that the reformation, under the said Cochran, was marvellous—such as was never known in those parts before. . . [A]s I was passing through Kennebunk, and hearing of a meeting of this society, I thought I would once more go and hear for myself. . . .

They had *private*, sometimes *dark*, meetings; in which none, but such as were bound by oath, to the most inviolable secrecy, not to divulge what was transacted in the meeting, upon penalty of eternal damnation, or of having their names blotted out of the book of life, were admitted. That each brother and sister in this fraternity has a spiritual husband, wife, mate, or yoke fellow, such as they choose, or their leaders choose for them. These spiritual mates, dissolve, or disannul, all former marriage connexions; and many of them bed and board together, to the exclusion of all former vows . . . .

Cochran pretends to have the power of life and death in his hands, and frightens his pupils into a compliance with any of his injunctions, by threatening to stop their breath in a moment; by which means he takes females from their parents, and carries them to his brothel. He declares that he has the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and pretends to open it for, or shut it against, whom he sees fit, by stretching out, and making a violent twist with his arm, one way or the other.

He has introduced among his followers a feast, which he calls the *passover*; at which they all partake, at one table, provided for the purpose, at which, large quantities of mutton, lamb, bread and wine, &c. are expended. At this feast, he has a method of marching in a double file, consisting of a male and female, as far as the number of the males will admit, or hold out. But they pretend to have *seven women to one man* (italics added), in the society, alluding, as they told me, to a prophecy, in Isaiah—*On that day, shall seven women take hold of one man.* . . . [H]is [Cochran's] dwelling-house,

in Saco . . . is on the road leading from Saco falls to Buxton corner. . . .

The general family consists of twelve females, besides those who visit the house occasionally. Some of these are widows, who, with the rest of the females, have surrendered their persons, character and property into the common stock; and remain in this place, as those declare who have left them, destitute, to all appearance. . . . [H]is original purpose of having *all things common*. . . . [He] tells of more than *two thousand people*, now under him. . . . Those, who are in close communion with him, are bound to obey him, without gain-saying; and this will account for his ruining the character of so many innocent females. . . .

Another young man, in presence of Judge Woodman, of Buxton, and myself, with several others, declared, that when he was admitted a member of Cochran's fraternity, he had to hold a Bible in his hand, while Cochran administered a solemn oath, or what was called so. The amount of which was, that if ever he divulged what took place in their private meetings, his name was to be blotted out of the book of life, and he suffer eternal damnation. He then pointed to, and named this young man's spiritual wife, and said he was willing they should lodge together, which they did, a number of nights, though he declared himself innocent of any sinful conduct. He testified, that Jacob Cochran lodged two nights, to his certain knowledge, while he was there, with a woman not his wife. Five couple[s] more lodged in the same house, who were not husband and wife; one of which, had a wife at home at her father's house at the same time. ("A Watchman" [Ephraim Stinchfield], *Cochranism Delineated*, 3-19)

### **Cochran Established a Community**

Historian Edward E. Bourne stated:

He [Cochran] must have a place which would be abiding, where the community of his disciples could enjoy a common home and have all things common. He accordingly found an impressible disciple in a neighboring town, owning a large house, who was willing to open his doors and receive the brethren and sisters under his roof. To make the home fit for

more complete freedom, some of the partition walls were taken away, converting the rooms into one, so that day and night they could enjoy all the communion and fellowship which they desired. *Here he broached the new doctrine that spiritual men should have spiritual wives. . . . Some females from Kennebunk became associates and part of the great family* (italics added). Here, under his own roof, Cockran and his disciples preached, and carried out this religion. How large his community was, we have not learned. But, while here, in the exercise and enjoyment of his spiritual freedom, violated law took hold of him, and he soon found himself an inmate of the State's prison. (Edward E. Bourne, *The History of Wells and Kennebunk*, 635)

### **The Testimony of Daniel Remich**

Maine Historian Daniel Remich recorded:

One Jacob Cochrane, who started on his career from Fryeburg, Maine, about 1815, succeeded in creating a wonderful excitement and in gaining great numbers of proselytes in several towns in Oxford, Cumberland and York Counties during the years 1816, 1817 and 1818. . . .

Cochrane soon gained a prominence and fame which at the outset he had neither sought nor expected. The superstitious notion that led him to become a religious teacher had no basis of sound morality, no affinity with pure Christian faith. Surrounded and fawned upon, as he was, by females of all ages, it was easy for him to cast aside the modicum of spirituality that had influenced his action—if, indeed, he had ever been moved by such an influence—and to yield to the “lusts of the flesh,” to devote his unexplainable gift to the basest purposes, to become an impostor and a scourge. There were among his followers pure-minded, truly-excellent men and women, who would not participate in the unhallowed practices of their leader. Some of these had sufficient intelligence and firmness to enable them to abandon the cause altogether. Others, weak-minded, credulous and superstitious, disapproved and lamented the gross corruption of their chief, but could not subdue the feeling that such power as had been imparted to him must be from above. . . .

The *Newburyport Herald* (May or June, 1819) says: "We have seen a pamphlet, published by a Baptist minister of regular standing in New Gloucester [Maine], giving an account of Cochrane and his deluded followers. It appears that under the guise of religion they have committed the most indecent and abominable acts of adultery. . . . One of their leading tenets was to dissolve the ties of matrimony as suited their convenience, and a promiscuous sexual intercourse was tolerated by each male, being allowed to take *seven wives!* It seems Cochrane, the high priest of iniquity, had had nearly half his female followers for wives in the course of his ministrations, which has been two years standing."

The principal places of resort of the disciples of Cochrane, so far as we can learn, were New Gloucester, Buxton, Saco and Kennebunk. At the last-named place meetings were frequently held in Washington Hall, and there were in the village three private dwelling-houses in some one of which a meeting was held every evening when the hall was not occupied for that purpose. In the largest and best of the three from ten to twenty of the brothers and sisters were accustomed to take up their abode from two to four weeks at a time, perhaps quarterly. . . .

The time came when it was believed by the lovers of good order that these flagrant offenses against the best interests of society should be met by the fiat, "No farther." In February, 1819, Cochrane was brought before Justice Granger, of Saco, on a complaint of gross lewdness, lascivious behavior and adultery, filed against him by Mr. Ichabod Jordan. On examination, the allegations of the complainant were so well sustained by the evidence produced that the Justice ordered the accused to recognize in the sum of eighteen hundred dollars for his appearance before the Supreme Judicial Court, at York, on the third Tuesday in May following. This he did.

At the commencement of the May term of the Supreme Judicial Court the grand jury found a bill against Cochrane and "he was arraigned on the third day of the term on five several indictments for adultery and open and gross lewdness," to each of which he pleaded "not guilty." On the trial for the offenses charged in the second bill of indictment the jury brought in a verdict of "guilty." It was found that the prisoner was not in court when the jury rendered its verdict,

and farther inquiries disclosed the fact that he had absconded . . . .\*

We learn from the court records that at the November (1819) term of the Supreme Judicial Court “the said Cochran is brought into court and set to the bar” and sentenced,—on the first count, to solitary imprisonment for the term of five days and that afterward he be confined to hard labor for eighteen months; on the second count a like sentence is imposed; on the third count, three days solitary confinement and one year hard labor; sentence to be executed at the state prison in Charlestown, Mass. Warrant for removal to the prison issued November 3, 1819. (Daniel Remich, *History of Kennebunk from Its Earliest Settlement to 1890*, 268–274)

### “The Cochran Fanaticism in York County”

A Maine Historical Society document states:

The history of fanaticism in this State can never be fully written, without a record of the rise, spread, character, and influence of Cochranism. It dates from 1817 or 1818 and onward. It’s range was in York County [Maine], with a few converts in other places. It’s centre and fullest development was in the upper part of the town of Saco, Buxton, Hollis, North Kennebunkport and Scarborough. It’s chief instigator, teacher, “head centre” and actor was Jacob Cochran—hence it’s name. . . . The place where he won his greatest popularity and perpetrated his most infamous impostures lay between the Orthodox meeting houses of Saco, Buxton and Scarborough . . . .

Cochran commenced his public labors; and with a great show of sympathy, earnestness and deep religious feeling he took well with that people. He did not claim to belong to any existing sect; nor avow any design of forming a new one; but with a great show of sanctity strove to raise all believers to a greater degree of devotion;—to the state of primitive piety, and if that was accomplished he said they would secure the privileges of the primitive Christians, the working of

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\*See also Gamaliel E. Smith, Esq., *Report of the Trial of Jacob Cochran* [Kennebunk, Maine; Printed by James K. Remich, 1819], 40; New York City Public Library.

miracles and apostolic gifts. He said but little of these points of difference and dwelt largely on those already believed by his hearers. Considering his attractions as a public speaker, and remembering his unparalleled, artful, cunning and deep penetration into human nature, it is not strange that the masses were drawn after him. . . .

In the vicinity of the Heath Meeting House in Saco he still made his headquarters; and there in the Summer of 1818 there was an extensive and powerful revival. . . . There was great excitement, loud responses, shouts, and various outbursts of emotion, but no grievous departures from rapturous religious feeling. It was for a while considered by many as a good work; and to some extent so it proved. Two thousand were thought to be converted. . . .

In this noted revival Cochran rose to the highest crest of his popular wave, and in consequence of it precipitated himself to his deepest disgrace. He could not modestly and temperately bear such unexpected popularity. He did not exalt the Devine Power and realize his own mere instrumentality. His most sanguine admirers became mentally intoxicated, and did not repress indecent adulation. *Females in the craze of their fanaticism would embrace him in public meeting and unblushingly kiss him, and he found apology for it in "the holy kiss" of Scripture* (italics added). Previous to this he had not broached any of his corrupt and damnable heresies. He had intimated innovations, but had not pressed them; had aspired to leadership, but moved towards it in an adroit and modest way. He now felt that Cochranism had become rooted, and he proceeded to give it a distinct form. . . .

His fame spread, and other wandering stars scented from afar their disgusting idiosyncrasies, and were drawn to his aid. For in other parts audacious heresies had been preached, and vile free love abominations practiced by the Osgoodites, and others, under the sacred garb of Christianity; and it is said that notorious adepts of this sort—pre-historic Mormons—came to Cochran's aid and helped sink him to his worst behavior. . . .

His next, and worst of all his devices, was his assault upon the sacred bonds of matrimony for the most corrupt purposes, and by the most revolting machinations he attempted to demolish this devine and all prevalent institu-

tion. Given in Eden for the virtuous propagation of the race; as the guardian of the most precious social enjoyments, it has kept pace with the descending ages, defying barbarism, ignorance, heathenism and lust; and yet this besotted fanatic, in the sacred name of religion thrust a dagger into it's vitals.

*He taught a spiritual matrimony sanctioned by a ceremony of his own, into which any man or woman, already married or unmarried, might enter choosing at pleasure a spiritual wife or a spiritual husband, with all the privileges of a legitimate marriage. Existing vows were violated, conjugal happiness tortured often with the forsaken party, and hitherto happy families severed. And soon it did not wait for any ceremony, but liberty was taken to practice unbridled licentiousness, of which Cochran himself was the most noted example (italics added). . . .*

But many still adhered to him; many who had been hitherto modest and virtuous, but now having no other rule of action but his word, no confidence in any persons which he did not approve, no other worship than that which he prescribed. Some connected themselves, their families, their property entirely to his dictation, and he was verily King in his realm. . . .

With the means contributed by his followers he purchased a house a little retired from the river-road running from Saco Village to Buxton, and in this his wife and children resided, and several others of his deluded followers. Here too he had a regular harem, consisting of several unmarried females . . . now subjects of his seduction and nothing else than his concubines.

Nor were his vile practices confined to himself, nor to these concubines, but wherever he went he corrupted any wife, mother or maiden that he could seduce, and his devoted followers generally walked in the same steps. With true fanatical zeal he pressed on in propagating his actions and corrupting views. . . .

Calling one day upon a certain family, the husband found it necessary to step out for a short absence, and upon returning caught him [Jacob Cochran] in criminal connection with his wife. This was too much for his principles or patience. He did not however settle the abuse as another husband did a similar offence, by seizing his ox-goad and giving him a

smart drubbing, but went to a magistrate and had him legally arrested. . . .

But by this Cochranism was death struck, a steady depletion from his counted ranks followed. Heretical spiritual matrimony tottered and fell; its entangled victims returned to their former homes and wives, and silently sought to keep out of harm's way. . . .

The jury convicted him, but sentence could not be pronounced in the absence of the prisoner [for he had escaped]. At the next term of the Court he was arraigned and sentenced to the State's Prison in Charlestown for a term of four years

. . . .

Cochranism had now received its death blow. It had been well given. It fell upon the Head of the Beast. Others were guilty, and were pestilent in their influence and deeds, but he was the leader, the corrupter, the most guilty.

After he was thus removed it dwindled away, and stayed its poison. Many of his victims discovered their folly and shame, and deeply repented of it; but a few were so thoroughly taken captive that they still adhered to it, aiding and encouraging each other, and occasionally meeting in some private house, and waiting their leader's enlargement.

After his liberation from prison he gathered his family, and such as cast in their lot with him, and, by the aid of friends, purchased a small farm in a remote part of Hollis

. . . .

Sometime about 1829 the clan removed from this place and left the State, and their resting place is not sufficiently well known to state it. At length death overtook him. . . . After his death his wife, and such as still survived of his attachees came back to Saco, from New York State. ("The Cochran Fanaticism in York County" [typed manuscript, dated August 3, 1867; compiler quotes "From the manuscript letter of P. Huntoon, Esq., . . . of Enfield, N. H. . . . July, 1866"], 1-19; this reference is also cited in *Saints' Herald* 109 [May 1, 1962]: 22)

### **Cochranism Continued after the Founder's Death**

Historian G. T. Ridlon explains how Jacob Cochran's de-

nomination continued:

But Cochranism was not extinguished with the death of its founder; the doctrines promulgated by him had taken too deep root. Long before Cochran had left the Saco valley he had anticipated what ultimately came to pass and had prepared for the extension of his empire. He saw the importance of introducing a missionary spirit into his system, and preached special sermons calculated to stimulate the zeal of his supporters on this line. With the same sagacious perception which had been so prominent a factor of his success in all his undertakings, he discovered those who had been gifted with natural fluency of speech and encouraged them to go forth and preach the doctrines they had embraced. This many did, absenting themselves from their homes and neglecting to provide for their dependent families and the cultivation of their farms until the inevitable results of poverty, hunger, and cold followed. (Ridlon, *Saco Valley Settlements*, 279)

Latter Day Saint missionaries arrived in southern Maine in 1832, only three years after Jacob Cochran moved from Maine to New York State. The Church missionaries visited the Cochranite communities, stayed in their homes, taught them the gospel, baptized some, and urged them to gather to Zion. As a result, many of his followers joined the Church and moved to Kirtland and Nauvoo. Some took their polygamous beliefs with them. They and their influence caused the “church of Christ . . . [to be] reproached with the crime of . . . polygamy” (see Doctrine and Covenants [1835 Edition] 101:4; RLDS Doctrine and Covenants [1950 Edition] 111:4b) and assisted in bringing about the untimely deaths of two innocent men, Joseph the Prophet and Hyrum the Presiding Patriarch.