

The Promise of Man? One Mid-Nineteenth Century Story

One recurring charge against pastors during the days of the early circuit rider was "breach of promise." Many pastors in those days were single young men, and it was not uncommon for a person to leave the itinerant ministry and settle down when he married and had a family to care for and support. Furthermore, pastors in those days were reassigned to a new charge every year. A common scenario, therefore, was for a pastor and a young lady of the congregation to begin an informal dating relationship. When the pastor was moved, there would be correspondence. Often the young woman took herself out of circulation, believing the continuing correspondence with her former pastor indicated a promise to return some day with a formal proposal of marriage. When such a proposal never came and/or the pastor actually married another young lady at one of his succeeding appointments, charges of "breach of promise" were brought by the family of the disappointed maiden.

Such is the general scenario of the case of John T. Cole — but this case is far from the usual. To present the story without giving away the ending, we present a series of 14 letters written by the young Rev. Cole to Miss Susan McElfish following his transfer from her parish. The letters are actually exhibits A through N in a breach of promise trial, but they may be read apart from any trial context. Taken in sequence they tell a story of romance, the trials of the ministry, and American life in general in the years just before the Civil War.

The McElfish family were prominent pioneer settlers in Flintstone MD, a few miles east of Cumberland MD and just south of the PA/MD state line. Both John McElfish (c1788-1834) and Anna Wilson (1794-1887) were born in Flintstone and spent their entire lives in that community. According to Anna's obituary in the Cumberland Times, they married in 1812 and raised 5 sons and 5 daughters. Mrs. McElfish and her three youngest children are mentioned in the letters.

Susanna McElfish – born January 19, 1831. She is the recipient of the letters. It appears that following the developments documented in the letters she moved to Cumberland MD and did not marry until 1900, and then to a Samuel Solomon Horn. She died March 8, 1915.

John McElfish – born March 10, 1833. He was admitted on trial in the Baltimore Conference in 1855 and assigned to Woodbury in Bedford County PA. It appears that this was his only regular appointment, and he is listed in later journals as a local pastor. The letters indicate he was considering the itinerancy. While secular sources often refer to him as Rev. John McElfish, he is listed as a farmer. He married Isabella McCloud Duncan [referred to as Belle in the letters] on September 23, 1859, and all their children were born in Flintstone. He died January 1, 1896.

Ann McElfish – born January 20, 1835. She is mentioned in the letters, but nothing more is known of her. She appears to have moved with friends and/or extended family to WV and was living there in the 1870's and 1880's.

The Cole family of Half Moon Valley remains a mystery. The Cole surname is common in Centre County, and it has not been possible to specifically identify the family of the Rev. John T. Cole who wrote these letters. It appears that the family lived in the northern part of the Half Moon Valley and that some of the children later moved to Clearfield County.

Rev. John T. Cole – birthdate unknown. The author of the letters was admitted on trial to the East Baltimore Conference in 1858 and assigned to the Allegany Circuit. [Spelling makes a difference. The Allegheny Circuit covered the mountains west of Altoona PA; the Allegany Circuit covered the Allegany County area east of Cumberland MD.] It was here that he met Susanna McElfish, the recipient of the letters. In 1859 he was assigned to Clinton Circuit (northwest of Lock Haven). In 1860 he was assigned to Shippen [Emporium], but for reasons explained in the letters was reassigned in mid-year to Karthaus. In 1861 he was assigned to Nippenose Valley, which proved to be his final assignment. The letters cover his entire ministerial career. Current research has not been able to determine what happened to Mr. Cole after he left the Methodist ministry in 1862.

EXHIBIT A

Halfmoon

February 24, 1859¹

To Miss Sue McElfish,

I seat myself to drop a line of information in regard to our journey. The day we left the ranch we took dinner at Chaneyville, then proceeded on our way to Bedford. We were somewhat cold by the time we reached that place. But after warming ourselves by the stove and taking supper we left considerably better. We then went to the Lutheran church. There were three or four penitents at the altar of prayer.

The next morning we started to Hollidaysburg. Tuesday was Washington's Birthday. The companies were in full uniform. In the evening we went to a temperance meeting. There were two or three preachers. They spoke on that subject. It was quite interesting. The Rev. D. Wilson was one of the speakers. He cut quite a splash. The whole congregation was in laughter.

The next morning we started on our way again, but did not quite reach home that evening. We had about two hours ride the next morning. I found my friends all well. I am now sitting at home trying to write a short epistle to you, the one I think of every day. John is here trying to enjoy himself the best he can. We

¹ John Cole left had to leave the Allegany Circuit and Flintstone MD on February 21 in order to arrive at Annual Conference in Williamsport PA by its starting date of March 3.

intend to start to Millheim in the morning. I think we will spend the Sabbath there.

You will please bid Anna good-bye for me. I did not think of her the morning we left. You will please excuse this short epistle and bad writing, for I have written hastily. I would ask you to answer this, but I know not where to tell you to direct. I will write again as soon as I get time.

Nothing more at present, but I remain your true friend,
J.T. Cole

EXHIBIT B

Williamsport

March 10, 1859

Dear friend,

I seat myself to drop you a short epistle. I have been spending a pleasant time for the last eight days in Williamsport. We have had a very profitable Conference. This is the eighth day of its sessions. I think it will close this afternoon or tonight.

I have passed through my examination. I feel somewhat relieved in regard to my mind. I cannot tell yet where I shall go this year. I understood that T.F. McClure² is to return to your circuit. No doubt it will be agreeable to the people of Allegany.

If the Conference closes this evening I will leave this place very soon and return home. I purpose on going to Clearfield County³ on next week, no providence preventing. I hope you are enjoying yourself very well. I hope that you will be kept by the Power of God until the day of redemption. I think of you every day, not only every day but also almost every hour of the day. That is something I cannot help.

Well, miss, I shall have to close again. Conference is about to set again. I am anxious to hear the close. I am not yet able to give you my address. I would like to hear from you, but I can not tell you where to write.

Nothing more at present, your very affectionate friend,
J.T. Cole

EXHIBIT C

Hyners Run

June 18, 1859

To Miss Sue McElfish, my dearest friend

I have been reading very busily all day, and I have become weary. I closed my book to meditate upon what I was reading. While meditating I thought of my friend Sue. I laid my book upon the shelf, and got a pen and ink. I now find myself trying to write a short epistle to her. I confess there are not many

² Thomas F. McClure (1817-1879) had served Allegany Circuit 1857-58, the year prior to John Cole's appointment there.

³ John Cole had siblings living in Clearfield County.

hours in the day but I think of her. There is no one in this world that has the part in my affection that she possesses. I trust I shall ever remain the same.

I am still trying to do something for the Lord, yet there is one thing certain. I have not been as faithful as I should have been. There has been a spirit of trifling about me for some time. I have prayed time and again that the Lord might remove it, yet I find some of it still lurking within — although I think it is leaving by degrees. May the time soon roll around when I shall be satisfied throughout soul and body.

It is too true that when there is such trifling among the preachers they can never accomplish that amount of good that God designs they should. I am determined to leave the first principles of the doctrine of Christ and go on to perfection. May God help me to carry this resolution into practice. I want to be a more holy, more cross-bearing servant of my divine Master.

God has declared that Heaven and earth may pass away, but not one jot or tittle of his law shall fail. It is God's law that we should be perfect. How shall we appear before the great tribunal unless perfect. God grant that sanctifying power may come now. Friend Sue, every pray for it, that you may become perfect in God.

My dear friend, I am going to make one request of you. I hope you will not think it strange or hard of me for doing so. I wish you not to attend those picnics and playing parties. They do not tend to the glory of God. There may be no harm in them themselves, but one thing is certain — there is a great deal of ungodly conversation, which is calculated to weaken our faith in God. You are aware that I do not think much of those playing parties. The reason I do not is because they are an abomination in the sight of God.

I hope you will admit this to be right. I have said it for your good. I have thought of it for some time. I did not mention it before, but I feel it to be my duty to try to get all to select the best places and best friends on the road to heaven.

O may you be fully blest
With friends selected from the best
And may it ever be upon your mind impressed
The glories of that heavenly rest.
When duty calls, let love grow warm
Amid the sunshine and the storm
With faith life's trials boldly address
Then come a conqueror to thy rest

Now, friend Sue, I hope this will be received as kindly as if I had said nothing about duty. If I had the time, I another sheet would will. But this must suffice. I will be glad to hear from you upon any subject you choose.

Your Lover,
J.T. Cole

EXHIBIT D

Hyner's Run

October 26, 1859

To friend Sue,

Esteemed friend, I received your kind letter on yesterday. I was truly glad to hear from you once more. It has been a long time since I heard from you. I hope longer than it shall be hereafter. I was not able to tell why it was, yet I had confidence in you, that you would answer my letter. But so long a time had passed away that I had become impatient. But receiving your letter has driven away all doubts. And with the greatest of pleasure I answer your letter this hour.

My health is very good, for which I should be very thankful. Part of this year my health was very delicate, and I did think that I would have to quit traveling for a while, but by the strength of God I was able to do my work, and I rejoice in Christ that I did not cease.

We had a campmeeting this year without the preacher in charge and me fighting. No petition got up or anything of the kind. I thank God for it. At that camp I received a greater blessing than I ever did before. Praise the Lord for it. In fact I have spent the year very pleasantly so far. I expect the balance of the year to be more glorious.

I paid a visit to my friends in Clearfield a short time since and found them all well. While there I witnessed the conversions of a sister and brother-in-law, which amply repaid me for my trip.

We have held two protracted meetings on our circuit. At the two meetings there were twenty souls converted. We intend to commence another on Saturday. We are looking for greater manifestations of God's power. Pray that God may bless the people — and while blessing the wicked world he may bless me more abundantly.

I often feel grieved the way I spent last year, in fact I feel that I was no advantage to the people or myself. I hope in God that I may never spend another year of that kind. But I sometimes console myself by thinking I was not the sole cause.

Well, Sue, prove faithful. The crown is at the end of the race. God is your strength. He is your shield. If providence does not permit us to meet on earth again, I hope to hail you on the banks of the river and shout "Glory" for ever and ever. But I hope to meet again on earth, when shall we meet again, never to sever until peace wreaths her choir around us for ever.

So John⁴ is married. Good for him. I suppose he has got that left rib replaced. I would like very much to see both of them. Tell Belle to write to me and let me know how she likes to be a McElfish. Give love to sister Ann. Tell her to be a good girl. Give my love to any others you see.

Nothing at present. Write soon. I remain your true friend,

J.T. Cole

⁴ Sue's brother John had married Isabella Duncan the previous month, on September 23, 1859.

EXHIBIT E

Halfmoon

March 21, 1860

To Miss Sue,

Dear friend, I once more seat myself to answer your letter. I should have done it long before this, but I have neglected until now. There are several reasons why I have not written sooner.

In the first place, it was a long time after your letter was mailed before I received it. I received it about one week before I left my circuit. Then I expected to get to Allegany as soon as Conference would close. But that desire has been frustrated. I had some business in the Centre County Court, and I was compelled to stay. I have just returned from Court, to my mother's. I intend to remain a day or two, then I will necessarily have to go to my circuit. I am alone this year, and it is necessary that I should be there. I have a very small circuit. There are four appointments. I will have to preach in Shippen⁵ every Sabbath.

Now, Sue, I do not want you to think hard or strange of me for not going to see you this spring. I assure you my will has been good to go. Indeed I think long to see you. I still stand firm to the engagement made between you and me, though I am deprived the privilege of your company now. I expect, however, in the future, if no providence prevents, to be blessed with you company — unless you should determine otherwise, which I have confidence in you that you will not. I expect to get to see you some time this year. By the next time I write I will be able to tell you when I can go.

I hope you are enjoying yourself very well. I suppose you are well pleased with you preachers. We have your Polsgrove over in our district this year. He is about as trifling as ever.

How are John and his Belle getting along? I am glad to hear that he has a notion to go with the regular work. Tell Belle to help him to preach. How is Ann? I suppose Aunt Anny is still living — and Ed, Joe and Jim Willison. If I had him by the nose I would help him to write. Give my love to all inquiring friends, and keep a good share for yourself.

Now, Sue, I wish you to write as soon as you receive this. If I have been negligent in this respect, set me an example. Please direct your letter to Shippen, McCain County Pa.

I close by saying good night. Your friend as ever,
J.T. Cole

⁵ Shippen is the former name of Cameron County town of Emporium.

EXHIBIT F

Hyner's Run

June 9, 1860

To Miss Sue McE,

Dear Sue, with pleasure do I seat myself to drop a few lines to the one whom I love. I should have written to you long before this, but owing to several reasons I have neglected it.

In the first place, I have been unsettled for some time. This you may think strange, but it is nevertheless true. I left Shippen about the first of May and have not been engaged in preaching since. But I expect to travel the balance of the year in Clearfield County. I suppose you would like to know the reason for my leaving Shippen. No doubt you are aware that the question of slavery has become very much agitated, and as the people of Shippen are abolitionists, we could not agree on that question. Rather than to have a fight on that subject, I chose to leave. Some of the preachers have censured me for leaving. But as far as I can learn, the Elder⁶ has justified me in my course of procedure.

But had all the preachers and people objected to the course I have taken, I should have acted as I did, from the fact that I have not been called to preach abolitionism. I think the Gospel has nothing to do with the question of slavery at all. Therefore I intend to wash my hands from the stain of that sin in the pulpit — let the consequences be what they may. I am sorry that this is the case, but this is a true statement of the matter.

I look for a scowring at Conference upon that point, but let it come like a whirlwind. God being my judge, I am right. If when I am right I act in accordance with my views, let others do as they may.

I had thought of going to see you while I have not been engaged in preaching, but I decided to get another appointment. I have had a correspondence weekly with the Elder since I left Shippen. I thought it best to stay where I would be likely to get his letters. I have succeeded in getting another circuit. I expect to start for it on tomorrow.

I think long to see you. If no providence preventing, I will visit you in the month of September, or October. If I could see any possible way of going sooner, I would do it. I think the circumstances will not permit, therefore I hope you will excuse me for my long delay.

My health this year is very good. I think I have not enjoyed better health for many years past. I received a letter from John a few days ago stating that you were all well. I was truly glad to hear from him and the rest of the family.

I hope you are enjoying yourself finely. It is my intention to get married some time next year. I am tired living alone. When I visit you in the fall, we will set the time, if it suits you. However, that will be for you to say.

The weather in this country is wet and cold, but we have fine prospects for crops and fruit. If there are no biting frosts or mildew, the store houses will be

⁶ This is a reference to the Presiding Elder of the District, now called the District Superintendent.

filled with rich blessings of God. You will please write soon. Do not pattern after me in that respect. Address Clearfield PO, Clearfield County Pa.

From your true friend,
J.T. Cole

EXHIBIT G

Clearfield

July 16, 1860

To Miss Sue McElfish,

Dear friend. After my respects to you, I will endeavor to answer your kind and welcome letter. I received it four, or five, days since. Believe me, I was glad to hear from you. Once more I confess I was too long writing to you before, but it was not because I did not think about you, or think enough of you. My mind is not always in a working mood, and I therefore beg to be excused for all delays. I expect to be right hereafter.

I have spent about five weeks on my new circuit. I find the country rough and broken, but the people appear to be very kind and clever. Every round I come within four miles of my brother and sister. I have been to visit them twice since I have been in this country. I expect to spend the balance of the year pleasantly. My colleague is a young man, without the orders to baptize, so I have all the marrying and baptizing to do.⁷ I spliced one couple in last Thursday — and on next Sabbath morning, before preaching, I will have seven young ladies to baptize and take them into full membership. I have baptized several children this year, but have never baptized any young ladies. I expect to get the shakes a little about that time.

We intend to hold a campmeeting on our circuit this year, commencing on the last day of August. I hope we may have a good one. I would be glad if you could enjoy the meeting with us. There will be any amount of camps in this country this season. I have been ordered to do three, but I think I will only attend two besides our own. I expect to take the time of one to visit you ladyship. Owing to the camps, I expect it will be the last of September before I can reach your country. I shall go as early as possible. I long to see you, and some of the friends in that country.

My colleague is a man that is about six feet five inches high, weighing about 200. When you see him in the pulpit, he presents a magnificent appearance. He has a voice like a locomotive. When he gets under full headway there is no stop to him. He is a perfect engine himself, and in addition to that he is very fond of the ladies. It is as good as an Animal Show to see him walk with a small lady. But after all he is a clever fellow. We get along very pleasantly.

⁷ The colleague was Joseph Reeder King (1832-1895), who was not ordained a deacon able to perform the sacraments of the church until the following March. As noted later in the letter, J.R. was known as a giant of a man, both physically and spiritually. April 1, 1861, he was married to Julia Hewitt, the daughter of the Thomas Hewitt who brought the formal charges against her uncle Franklin E. Hewitt as described in the article beginning on page 30 of this volume.

The spirituality of the people in this country is not very good, but we are praying for a revival all over the circuit.

Give my regards to John and the wife, also to Anna. Write soon. Address Clearfield, etc.

From your affectionate friend,
J.T.C.

EXHIBIT H

Clearfield

October 21, 1860

To Miss Sue McElfish,

Dear friend. According to promise I now seat myself to inform you of my welfare and the manner in which I arrived home.⁸ I expected to get to Bedford, but did not. It was owing to the roads being very bad. I stayed over night in Centerville. The next day by noon I was in Bedford, remained there until the next morning, then proceeded homewards. I traveled 43 miles that day, which caused my colt to be very tired. We rested the next morning. She was right side up, with care. I traveled 20 miles again until one o'clock, and there put up with cousin John Shires until the next morning, which was Saturday. That left me 37 miles to drive that day, but I reached home by sun down. I ate my supper and went to church — but being very tired I preached a very short sermon, dismissed the congregation, and went to my staying place and went to bed. The next morning I was ready for my work.

I now confess my visit over to your country was very pleasant indeed. My journey over there and back was somewhat tiresome and lonely, but the manner in which I enjoyed myself while there amply repaid all my trouble. The morning I left you was somewhat trying, although I kept my feelings down as much as possible. But if you could have understood the heaving of my heart, it would have revealed more than you would have expected. But I knew there was no other way for me than to go alone. But that was not as I wished it to be. But I look forward to a better day. There appears to be a stronger attachment for the one I love than ever previous to my visit to your country. Indeed it had always been strong, but I feel that it is still growing — and I hope it is still increasing on both sides.

The morning I asked the Old Lady⁹ for my better half, I met her on the road as I was taking my horse to water it. It appeared that Providence favored me with a good opportunity. I told her that I had concluded to take Sue away after a while, and I wished to know if she had any objections. The manner in which she

⁸ John apparently followed through on his promise in Exhibit F to visit Sue in "September or October" and now is heading back to his appointment.

⁹ This is a curious way for John Cole to refer to Susan's mother, Anna Wilson McElfish. John McElfish, Susan's father, had died many years previous, in 1834. Later in the letter it appears that John borrowed a buggy for his ride back home and/or to use on his circuit. The fate of that buggy and John's concern to make things right financially are a recurring theme in subsequent letters and reveal both John's genuine affection for Mrs. McElfish and his desire to be honest in his dealings.

answered me was as follows. She said, "I believe not — you are both old enough to judge for yourselves." She appeared to be perfectly satisfied. I thanked her for her civility. I think she thought she might as well be satisfied, for we would do as we pleased. She then wanted to know when it would be, but that I could not tell — only that it would be some time next year.

The old buggy stood it finely. I came home earlier than I want. I have it now at the shop. I expect it will soon come out, but I do not expect to use it this winter.

You will please give my love to John and Belle. Tell Belle to take good care of her papoose. Tell her if it should get awake at night, she must get up and light a paper candle so that strangers may have light to go to bed by.

I will be glad to hear from you soon. From your affectionate friend,
C.T.J. [sic]

EXHIBIT I

Clearfield

December 20, 1860

To Miss Sue,

Dear friend. After my respects to you and friends, I hasten to reply to your letter I received a few weeks hence and was truly glad to hear from you.

I am getting along as well as possible, although I have been labouring very hard since I saw you. Our meetings have almost come to a close for this year. We have three yet to hold and then we are through for this season. We number about 60 conversions this year.

Well, Sue, there appears to be no end to my troubles. The trouble to which I refer to now is of a peculiar kind and I feel under obligation to inform you of the fact. This trouble is with the ladies, or lady, on the circuit I traveled last year.¹⁰ Through my sport, and in the presence of one or two witnesses, I told her that if she had no objections I would marry her — and it appears that she has taken it in earnest, which I never intended to do. I thought she so perfectly understood me that she knew that I was just in sport. Ash¹¹ has been telling them that I intended to marry you. When I heard that she was preparing to marry me, I wrote to her that if she considered what had passed between her and me an engagement she should release me. She did not answer my letter, but engaged some person to write to the Elder that I had disappointed her and wished to have me brought before the Conference for trial.

Well, Sue, she need not try to scare me to marry her in that manner. She can't do it. I know who I have promised to marry — and that person I intend to marry if she does not back out, that is you. You will please say nothing about this affair. I thought it my duty to let you know the fact, because it may reach you in a different light. I have given you the matter just as it is. I am not able to tell what you will think of it. I don't wish you to think less of me for this trouble. I am

¹⁰ The reference is to the Clinton Circuit, where he had his home base in Hyner.

¹¹ Henry M. Ash (1849-1910) served Clinton Circuit 1860-61 and was John Cole's successor there.

perfectly innocent of the whole matter, but I did tell her that I would marry her — it was sport, and I thought she understood it as such. Now I expect to hear from you soon. Give my regards to John and wife.

Your affectionate as ever,
J.T.C.

EXHIBIT J

Clearfield

January 28, 1861

To Miss Sue Mc.

Dear friend. I received your Noel in letter a few days since and was truly glad to hear from you once more. In the first place I will say I have just one round more to make on my circuit. We are now holding our last Quarterly Meeting. Our P.E. was not with us, neither did he send us a preacher in his place. We had to be Elder ourselves. We are considerably back with our finances, but I think in our last round we will get it all. We have had about 75 conversions this year. About 80 have joined the church.

I learn from your letter that the people in your country have become tired being alone. The people in our country are infected with the same disease. Any amount of people have tied themselves up this year. One reason to be assigned for this is that last year, leap year, the ladies have made good use of their time. There are others on this side that would like to be if they could. That lady of mine that would like to catch me is a trap. I have heard but little about it since I last wrote to you. I suppose you hear as much if not more than I do. I have heard that H.M. Ash is making himself very busy in the matter, for which I expect to talk to him like a father when I get to see him. I will just say to you that you need not fear in regard to the engagement between you and me. I shall stand to it if I must forfeit my membership in the Conference, but I have no fears in regard to it. I know not where my lot shall fall next year, but wherever it may fall I want you to share part of it with me — unless you have changed your mind. On that point I trust you have not.

I should like to see you very much. But I think I cannot until the time mentioned when I was over — unless I should change my mind on that point and go sooner. I trust you are enjoying yourself well. My regards to all inquiring friends. I will be glad to hear from you once more before Conference.

From your sincere friend,
J.T.C.

EXHIBIT K

Center Line

March 29, 1861

To Miss Sue McElfish,

Dear Friend. After my respects to you and friends, I hasten to write you a few words to inform you of my whereabouts. I have returned from Conference a few days time. I take the personal opportunity to let you know that I am still

alive, although not well. I contracted a cold on my return from Conference and have not been at all well since. On last evening I suffered more than I have done for years, with a severe pain in my head and stomach. I feel some better today.

I did expect to go to my field of labor this week, but owing to my indisposition I shall have to wait until I get better. My labor, as far as traveling is concerned, will be easy. I have but two appointments, and they are but two miles apart. I think they are in a very pleasant country, although I have never been there. I can not speak definitely in regard to it.

I expected some difficulty in Conference with that lady that I wrote to you about some time ago, but all passed off smoothly. But the matter is not yet settled. She still insists that I must marry her. I think she might as well save her breath, for marry her I will not — no, not if she were the last female in the world.

I wrote you sometime since that H.M. Ash took a stand against me in that matter, but I believe I was wrong. I therefore feel like taking back all I have said concerning him.

My head pains very much and I must close. I shall ever remain faithful to you. Please address to Nippenose Valley, Lycoming County Pa.

J.T. Cole

EXHIBIT L

Nippenose

June 12, 1861

To my respected friend Sue,

After my respects to you and friends, I hasten to give you some very unexpected news. I have never sit down with so much reluctance in my life as I do so at this time from the fact that you are disappointed and my matrimonial happiness is forever blasted. No doubt you will feel surprised when I tell you that I am married.

Now, Sue, I do not believe there is a man living that feels as miserable as I do at present. You may think I say this in order to screen myself from the manner in which I have treated you, but God knows it is as I say. I could almost wish that I did not live. If any person had told me one month ago that I would have married any lady but you, I should have said it was a falsehood. My love this day is stronger for you than any other lady on earth. You may think this is strong talk, after having one that they call my wife. It is strong, but it is true.

My intentions were pure toward you ever since we first talked upon the matter. Can you believe me? I know it is hard to believe now, since the manner in which I have acted toward you. I can make use of no stronger language than to say it is in fact really so. Circumstances sometimes alter cases. In this case there appeared to be no other alternate. If there had been, I should have proved true to you.

Now, Sue, can you find a place in your heart to forgive me. If you can, it will afford me a great deal of pleasure. But if not, I will suffer all that you can put

on me. I know that I have treated you badly, but may God help you to forgive me. I have suffered more already than you can imagine.

Allow me to make that watch a present to you. If I knew any possible way I could comfort you for the disappointment, I would willingly do it. How shall I do it, Sue? I would to God I had never been born. This is a hard saying, but I feel just as I write.

Now, Sue, I will ask you to write once more to me if you do not feel too much provoked so to do. I have not received a letter from you since Conference. I have looked long and steady for one, but none came. I wrote to John since I wrote to you. I told him in his letter that I would be glad to hear from you if you had not gone off South. I received an answer from him, but he did not say one word about you. Likely you did not get my last letter. Tell your mother that I will send her that money for the buggy the first good opportunity.

With these remarks I close, but must subscribe myself your friend,
J.T.C.

EXHIBIT M

Nippenose

August 30, 1861

To Miss Sue,

Dear friend, for such I shall ever call you. I received your letter about two hours since. I avail myself of the present moment to answer it. I hardly know how to commence. But you have called my attention to several points in your letter.

First, you want to know if the lady I married was the one that I wrote to you about last winter. I answer that she is not. I never made an engagement with her, and I never intended to marry her. I married a Miss Shies.

You also wanted to know why I did not fulfill the engagement with you. That is the only question that I am not willing to answer. Sue, that is a question that no one knows but God and myself. I could not answer that question under any consideration. If there was a soul on earth I would tell it to, it would be you. But I say this: it was not because I lost any affection for you, or any thing that would reflect upon your ladyship. I find no fault in you whatever. God knows that to be true.

I tell you. Sue, I never expect to answer that question on this side of eternity. Anything else you want to know, if I can answer, I will do it with the greatest of pleasure. I never can, nor I never will, say a word against you in this world.

Secondly, you wished me to send your likeness back. Now, Sue, I do not like to do that. You state that I can not appreciate it now. Let me say that I think more of that than I do of my life. I do not wish you to insist on my sending it back. If you please, allow me to keep it. But if you insist on my sending it back, I shall do so. But I would rather not.

I say as I said in my other letter, that I am sorry it is so — as much so as you can be. I hope you will try to forget it as soon as you can. Now, Sue, I shall be glad to hear from you at any time.

From your friend and well wisher,

J.

Tell your mother that I have done the best I could to get that money for her. But I think I will not be able to get it before the month of November, and then I will send it to her. J.

EXHIBIT N

[no place stated]

[no date given]

I confess I have caused you trouble and sorrow. My actions have deprived me of your company, and you have deprived me of the last grain of consolation by demanding your likeness. O wretched man that I am. When shall this darkness fall from my eyes.

Farewell, Sue. But I hope we may meet again.

J.

This ends the series of letters and the unfolding of the tragic saga of Rev. John T. Cole and Miss Susanna McElfish. It is assumed that the "likeness" referred to is a photograph.

The article closes with two appendices, essentially the remaining contents of the files on John T. Cole. Appendix A gives three letters pertaining to the trial held by a committee during the annual conference of 1862: the letter of John McElfish bringing charges on behalf of his sister, and two letters of John Cole explaining his absence from conference — and his desire to continue in the ministry, even if it must be in another conference. The correspondence is directed to James Sanks (1806-1862), the presiding elder for the Bellefonte District — of which John Cole's Nippenose Circuit was a part, which fact made him the one to deal with the charges at the March 1862 Annual Conference in Baltimore MD.

Appendix B gives the official account of the trial. John Cole was unable to attend because of illness, and the trial was postponed for a few days in the possibility that the accused might yet arrive. The court of trial found the accused guilty of all charges and expelled him from the church, thereby removing any possibility of transfer to another conference.

Since the charges sustained were "breach of promise" AND "immorality", and considering the strange and rapid turn of events, it is tempting to conclude things not specifically stated in either the letters or the trial. And while reading between the lines and noting recurring patterns in the letters may lead to several other reasonable inferences about John Cole, we simply close by recognizing the difficulties inherent in responding to God's call in a fallen world.

Appendix A. Letters pertaining to the ecclesiastical trial of John T. Cole.

Flintstone

March 1, 1862

Dear Brother Sanks,

I am compelled from the treatment that my sister Susan has received from John T. Cole to present the following charge of immorality: specification, breach of promise of marriage.

I have informed him that I would present him at Conference. It is impossible for me to attend, but I will place all the letters in the hand of Brother Gwynn, who will see that they go before the Committee.

I do this at my sister's request who feels herself much grieved.

Your Brother,

John McElfish

For Susan McElfish

Harrisburg

March 5, 1862

To Rev. J. Sanks,

Dear brother. I am sorry that I have been detained, but it appears altogether unavoidable. I came to this place on yesterday with the morning train and took severely ill, and I have not been able to get further.

I have an attack of the pleurisy in the side and have suffered greatly since my arrival. I thought I would be able to go on in the night train, but I failed in that. From present indications, I will have to remain here for several days. I think it proper that I should give you and the Conference some knowledge of my whereabouts. If I recover in time to get on to Conference before it closes, I will do so.

But if I should not, I shall call upon you to attend to the business that would devolve on me were I there — that is, as far you can.

I would say in regard to those debts that rest upon me. I am ready to meet them at any time. I had intended to meet them at Conference, but as I have been detained it will necessarily have to be deferred a few days longer.

I ask you, if you please, to place my case before the Conference for a transfer to the Rock River Conference. I will feel under great obligation to you, the Conference, if it is granted. However, I subject to the decision of the Conference.

Yours truly,

J.T. Cole

Halfmoon

March 10, 1862

To Rev. J. Sanks,

Dear Brother. I am still unable to reach Conference. I remained in Harrisburg longer, until last Saturday, and I am now just able to be out of my bed half of the time.

You will please attend to my transfer. I do not expect to be out much for two weeks. I am now with my brothers in Huntingdon County.

Yours truly,

J.T. Cole

Appendix B. Transcripts of the ecclesiastical trial of John T. Cole.

March 10, 1862

The Court of Trial met at 3 o'clock PM: H. Furlong, chairman; R.D. Chambers, secretary. Brother Kalbfus led in prayer. The following brethren answered to their names at the call of the roll: Josiah Forrest, B.H. Green, G. Stevenson, H.G. Dill, C. Kalbfus, J.S. McMurray, William Harden, J.McK. Reiley, J.H. Dashiell, E.W. Kirby, E. Welty, A.M. Creighton, and J.H. DeMoyer.

On motion of Brother McMurray, F.B. Riddle was appointed to conduct the prosecution in the case of John T. Cole, and William Gwynn to conduct the case in behalf of the defense.

Brother McMurray offered a motion to adjourn the case, for the present, and to request the secretary to write to John T. Cole upon the case in hand. Brother Kirby offered as a substitute that the case be referred to the Presiding Elder of Bellefonte District. The substitute was lost, and the original motion prevailed.

March 14, 1862

The Court of Trial met, pursuant to adjournment, at 3 o'clock PM: H. Furling, chairman; R.S. Chambers, secretary. Prayer by Brother J. McK. Reiley. Members present: J. McK. Reiley, E. Welty, J.S. McMurray, E.W. Kirby, J.A. DeMoyer, H.G. Dill, B.H. Crever, George Stevenson, J. Forrest, J.H. Dashiell, A.M. Creighton, C. Kalbfus; Finly, prosecution; J.L. Deale, defense.

Bill of charges presented.

Charge — Immorality.

Specification — Breach of promise of marriage.

The prosecution presented as testimony letters marked A,B,C,D,E,F,G,H,I,J,K,L,M.

William Gwynn called by the prosecution.

Question by George Stevenson: Are you acquainted with Brother Cole?

Answer: No more than a Conference acquaintance.

Question by C. Kalbfus: What is the character of sister McElfish?

Answer: She bears an unquestionable character. She is pious.

Question by J.A. DeMoyer: Is she a member of the M.E. Church?

Answer: She is.

The prosecution and defense agreed to submit the case without argument.

Brother McMurray moved that the specification — breach of promise of marriage — be sustained, which prevailed unanimously. Brother Dill moved that the charge of immorality be sustained, which prevailed unanimously.

Brother Stevenson moved that John T. Cole be and hereby is expelled, which prevailed unanimously.

On motion, the secretary was authorized to sign the names of the Court to the finding. On motion, the Court adjourned.

The Susquehanna Conference in the United Methodist Church

Later this year, the United Methodist Church will once again have a Susquehanna Conference. Within United Methodism, the Susquehanna Conference was created November 14, 1964. In 1968 that ecclesiastical body officially became the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church.

On October 18, 1969, the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church joined with other mid-state United Methodist congregations to become the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church. The name of the new conference and the date of the union were deliberately chosen to coordinate with statewide efforts to reorganize the denomination's structure and ministry in Pennsylvania. The previous week on October 11, 1969, congregations to the west voted to join and become the Western Pennsylvania Conference. The following week on October 25, 1969, congregations to the east voted to join and become the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference.

On June 4, 2009, the Central Pennsylvania Conference voted to return to the name Susquehanna Conference. The change was prompted by the union of the conference with the Pennsylvania congregations of the Wyoming Conference, named for the Wyoming Valley in northeastern Pennsylvania. To adequately identify the conference within national and global contexts, the tentative logo for the new conference's letterhead and website explains that the Susquehanna Conference is "A Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church."

While both the old and the new Susquehanna Conferences covered churches in Central Pennsylvania, there are geographic differences. The old Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church also included area outside Pennsylvania but was limited to the watershed of the Susquehanna River and its extension, the Chesapeake Bay. The new Susquehanna Conference is limited to Pennsylvania but also includes areas in the watersheds of the Delaware, Ohio and St. Lawrence Rivers.

The final vote to make the name change official is scheduled for the June 12, 2010, special session to formally unite the Pennsylvania congregations of the present Wyoming and Central Pennsylvania Conferences. That session will be held in Williamsport PA at the Cultural Arts Center and will include the ordinations of the Pennsylvania candidates approved by the two Conferences.