

“General Meeting”

On October 31, 1683, Hubbard wrote Elder William Gibson, who was living in New London, “O that we could have a general meeting: but winter is coming upon us.” With only the one church at Newport (on an island) and other members scattered on the mainland, it was difficult for them to meet together. The Newport church appointed May 25 (*sic.*, should be May 24), 1684 (New Style), as a “General Meeting” and invited all the brethren in New London, Westerly, Narragansett, Providence, Plymouth Colony, and Martha’s Vineyard to join them. “The object of this meeting was to bring the members, so widely scattered, together at a communion season.”¹ This is the first recorded general meeting of early Sabbath-keepers in America. (May 24 was a Wednesday; Pentecost was on May 22.) Hubbard reports 26 or 27 in attendance. Prayers were given and questions were asked and answered. Some of the questions involved communion: a duty? how often and with whom? Should it be kept at night? Hubbard does not say.²

The Rogerenes

Even in America, it was dangerous during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to zealously keep the Sabbath. If you were too outspoken, you could be imprisoned. You would also face ridicule from *other* Sabbatarians.

John Crandall, a Westerly minister, traveled to New London, Connecticut, and through his preaching during 1674-5, converted John Rogers, his brother James Rogers, and an Indian named Japeth. The local Protestant minister, Mr. Bradstreet, raged against the new Sabbath-keepers. Samuel Hubbard, William Hiscox and Joseph Clarke came to New London to receive the new members into the fold. In less than two months, John Rogers was in Hartford prison for his views. After being released, Rogers wrote Hubbard on December 22, 1675:

We do not forbear work on the first day of the week, yet [if] it should come to a trial the 7th day Sabbath

may be pleaded for in the audience of the people for ye common people are afraid to talk with us for fear of being tainted with heresy. The times are so troublesome that there is no passing: we should be glad to see you: but the times being so bad we thought it not safe ventring [*sic.*].³

Hubbard encouraged Rogers, reminding him that it was “not strange if we or you should meet with fiery trials as others have.” Soon the entire Rogers family was imprisoned again, charged with violating the Sabbath by laboring on Sunday. James, John, Jonathan and James Rogers, Jr. wrote to the town court explaining their point of view, basing their conduct on the Ten Commandments and Jesus Christ. They were harassed and then released.

In 1678, the Rogers family was in prison yet again. By this time, the extreme views of the Rogers family had put them at variance with other Sabbath-keepers. Their refusal to take medicines, and firm reliance on the Almighty for healing, made the sect, known as Rogerenes, despised throughout New England. John Rogers was fined “for not going to their [church] meeting on the first day, & for beating his lether [*sic.*] for his work for shoes on the first day.”

The other Sabbatarians tried to restrain the “excesses” of the Rogerenes. An official letter of reproof was sent on July 16, 1678, signed by William Hiscox, William Gibson, Samuel Hubbard, Stephen Mumford, John Maxon, John Read, Roger Baster and John Thornton. When William Gibson, lately of the Bell Lane church in London, England, was sent to New London to preach to the Rogerene Sabbatarians there, he ended up quarrelling instead. The Rogerenes remained adamant in their refusal to use medicine or seek medical help. Even when the elder Rogers injured his leg when a cart ran over it, he refused to get medical attention, but was healed anyway.

It has been reported that during the smallpox epidemic of 1721 in Boston, John Rogers deliberately traveled there to demonstrate his divine immunity. Nevertheless, he caught the disease, and on his return spread it throughout his family. Backus reports that the Rogerene sect still existed in 1777.⁴

III. Westerly and the Newport Movement

By this time, more members lived on the mainland than at Newport. Sabbath-keepers, converts of Mumford, had lived at Westerly since 1666. It was common to hold the yearly meeting at Westerly, on the mainland.

At a yearly meeting of the church at Westerly on September 28, 1708 (New Style), the decision was made to separate into two churches. At this time, there were 72 at Westerly and 41 at Newport. (The Feast of Tabernacles for that year started Saturday, September 29.) Westerly's first elder, John Maxson, was ordained on October 1, "by fasting and prayer and laying on of hands."⁵

Westerly (First Hopkinton) Ministers

In April, 1709, Joseph Clarke, Jr., was ordained as a deacon, and in 1712 he was ordained an elder, and John Maxson, Jr., a deacon. "The office of deacon meant much in that day, as the deacon was authorized to baptize, and it was understood that he was to become an elder in due time . . . there was no time when the church did not have two elders and sometimes four or five." Pastors usually served as deacons before becoming pastors.⁶ This practice no doubt strengthened the leadership of the Sabbatarians.

John Maxson 1708-1720
Joseph Clarke, Jr. 1712-1719
Joseph Maxson, Jr. 1719-1747
Joseph Maxson (Bro.) 1739-1750
Thomas Hiscox 1750-1773
(preached at Newport, 1732-50)
Thomas Clarke 1750-1767
(assisted Hiscox)
Joshua Clarke 1768-1793
(state legislator, other public offices)
John Burdick 1774-1802
(increased membership; organized several churches; preached among other denominations)
Abraham Coon 1798-1813
Matthew Stillman 1804-1838⁷

Westerly — Leading Church

The Sabbatarian church in Westerly was the first such church organized in the town, although others had tried before. In its best times, it numbered 1,000 members. As late as 1800, Seventh Day Baptists were more numerous in Westerly than all other persuasions combined.⁸ Later, when the Newport church died, Westerly grew and eventually divided into several churches.

Newport Movement: Emigration Spreads Seventh Day Baptists

Westerly derived its name from being to the west of Newport. Its founding as a Sabbatarian church was the direct result of westward migration. Seven other churches were organized as a direct result of Newport-Westerly westward expansion. Newport is one of three centers from which all Sabbatarian churches in America sprang, the others being Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Piscataway, New Jersey.

"Newport Movement" churches include Newport, Rhode Island; Westerly, Rhode Island (1708); Shrewsbury, New Jersey (1745); New London, Connecticut (officially organized in 1784, although Sabbath keepers were there in the 1670s); Little Hoosic Valley, Rensselaer County, New York, later the Petersburg church, and still later Berlin (1780); Burlington, Connecticut (1780); Bristol, Connecticut, later Farmington (1790); Oyster Pond, Long Island (c. 1790); and Brookfield, Madison County, New York (1797).

IV. The Philadelphia Movement

The second center of Sabbatarians in America was Philadelphia, where four churches began in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Few historical records exist of these churches, and they apparently died out by the early 1800s. Agitation concerning the Sabbath question began in Pennsylvania about 1687.⁹

Abel Noble — Controversial Figure

In 1684, thirteen years after the forming of the Newport Sabbatarian Church, Abel Noble came to Philadelphia from London. Some

historians report that he was a Seventh Day Baptist minister, a member of the Mill Yard Church in London. The evidence to support this assertion is found in two letters sent from London to Piscataway.

The first, dated September 17, 1741, is addressed to the Sabbatarian church in Piscataway, New Jersey, and is signed by Robert Cornthwaite (pastor of Mill Yard Church, 1726-1755), Daniel Noble, and others. It acknowledges a letter from Philadelphia brethren Abel Noble and Nicholas Ashmead. Another letter from London, dated August 27, 1743, is addressed "To the Churches of Christ of the same faith, usually holding their yearly meeting at Piscataway," and is signed by Robert Cornthwaite, Daniel and Noah Noble, and others; the letter inquires about Abel Noble.¹⁰ One may infer from these that Abel Noble had been a member of the Mill Yard Church.

The official Seventh Day Baptist history, however, disputes this claim. It states that Noble's religious connections are unknown prior to his coming to America.

Noble bought a large tract of land 25 miles north of Philadelphia. Soon after settling, Noble is said to have traveled extensively in New Jersey, where he met the "Rev." Thomas Chillingworth (or Killingsworth), believed to be the organizer of the First Baptist Church at Piscataway. Chillingworth is reported to have baptized Noble.¹¹

One source states that Noble was the son of a wealthy Quaker of Bristol.¹² It is reported that Noble soon affiliated with the Quakers and married among them (1692), which would not have been allowed had he not been recognized by them as a bona fide member.¹³

Keithian Quakers

In 1691 there arose a hot dispute among the Quakers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey "concerning the sufficiency of the 'Inner Light' and the value of the Scriptures as the rule of faith and practice." George Keith, who had left the Church of Scotland to become a follower of Penn and Fox, led a group of dissenters that broke off from the Quakers. They were termed "Keithian Baptists" or "Christian Quakers." Keith and his followers denied that man has

within himself what is needed for salvation "and magnified the need and power of Christ and gave special prominence to the 'Commandments of God and the Holy Scriptures'."

Abel Noble was one of the 48 signers of a document setting forth reasons for the Keithian separation, and he continued among them as a leader after Keith himself deserted the group he had founded and went back to the Church of England.

The Second Sabbath-keeping Church in America — Newtown (1697)

Noble may have been a Sabbath-keeper on arrival in America, although he was "liberal" enough to affiliate with the Quakers. Or he may, as reported in Seventh Day Baptist history, have received the Sabbath from Dr. William Gillette, a Sabbatarian from Connecticut, on a tour in eastern New Jersey.

Keithians were open-minded and determined to live entirely according to the Bible. When Noble introduced the Sabbath and baptism to the Keithian remnant at Upper Providence, Pennsylvania, they readily accepted these un-Quaker beliefs.

In 1697 at Upper Providence, Pennsylvania, at the home of Thomas Powell, Abel Noble conducted a protracted series of meetings among the Keithians. In January (others say in the summer) of that year, he baptized Thomas Martin, an influential Quaker, who then became a Sabbath-keeper. Martin himself baptized five in August, and ten more new converts in September.

A church was organized on October 12, 1697, and Martin was chosen minister by lot, whereupon he administered the Lord's Supper "to them for the first time." Another writer contends that it was not until 1700 that the new converts in Upper Providence founded a Sabbatarian church. Noble declined to be their minister, although he later ministered in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. In 1752 he was in West Chester County, New York.¹⁴

William Davis — Pennepek Church (1699)

In 1698 there were four reported baptisms; in 1699, eight. One of the new members was

William Davis, who had come to Pennsylvania from Wales in 1684, the same year as Noble. He, too, had been a Quaker leader, but he had gone out in the Keithian separation in 1691. Soon thereafter, he had joined the First Baptist Church at Pennepek, Pennsylvania. In 1698 he was excommunicated from the Baptist Church because he believed Christ to be neither divine nor human, but a mixture of both. Noble invited him to Upper Providence, and through Noble, Davis embraced the Sabbath. In late 1699, he returned to Pennepek and organized a Sabbatarian congregation there, mainly from former Keithians. He baptized six in 1700.¹⁵

Sabbath Debates

Episcopalians, led by Evan Evans and George Keith, attacked the Sabbatarians with vigor and nearly succeeded in destroying the group, despite the “able defense” of Elders Thomas Martin and William Davis. Some of the most influential Sabbatarians at Upper Providence gave up the Sabbath, but the faithful remnant moved to David Thomas’ home in nearby Newtown. In February of 1702, public debates were held between the leading ministers of each side, one of which was between Davis and Keith in nearby Philadelphia.

The Sabbatarians of Pennepek lost their place of worship when its owner renewed fealty to the Church of England, and Davis left them in 1711 for the Westerly Sabbatarian Church, where he preached occasionally until 1714.

Eventually the adverse tide turned, and Newtown emerged stronger by emigration and converts from the community.¹⁶

Other “Philadelphia” Churches

Nantmeal, also known as French Creek and possibly Canogocheage, was organized c. 1722 as a branch of the Newtown congregation, and was located about 30 miles from Philadelphia. In 1726, it was reinforced by former first-day Baptists. Nantmeal gained further members and became the largest church numerically, but Newtown was always considered the headquarters. In 1770 the Nantmeal church had 18 families and 24 members. A building

was constructed in 1762.

Nottingham, near the Maryland line, was the fourth church of the Philadelphia group. It is not known when this church was organized, but its meetings were held mainly at the house of Abigail Price or the homestead of the Bonds. Samuel and Richard Bond were the leaders.¹⁷

Yearly Meetings

In the early years of its history, Newtown opened correspondence with the churches in New Jersey and Rhode Island.

Also, from the start, a yearly meeting was instituted. The New Jersey churches sometimes attended these meetings. Newtown, as the headquarters, held the “May Meeting,” while the “August Meeting” was held at Nottingham. The purpose, dates, and proceedings of these meetings is not yet known. There is no detailed record of Pennsylvania churches.

It is interesting to note that “while each church had its own place of meeting and maintained its own appointments for worship, they had a Yearly Meeting, which all were expected to attend.”¹⁸ Attendance, then, was apparently required.

At a yearly meeting held at Nantmeal (French Creek) in 1745, the church at Piscataway, New Jersey, sent Jonathan Dunham for ordination. The ordination was performed by Elders Lewis Williams and Abel Noble.¹⁹

Ministers

The four churches had several ministers. Besides Noble, William Davis, Thomas Martin and Thomas Rutter, there were William Beckingham, Philip Davis, Lewis Williams (these three were from the Great Valley Baptist Church, converts to the Sabbath, members of the Nantmeal church), and John Bryman.²⁰ It appears that Rutter and Davis had relatives in the Newport Sabbatarian Church.²¹

Enoch David of the Nantmeal church was a noteworthy minister in the middle 1700s. His son, Ebenezer David, graduated from Brown University in 1772 and was ordained at Newport in 1775. As stated previously, he

became a chaplain in the Continental Army and died near Philadelphia in 1778.

Sunday Law of 1794

In 1794 a Sunday “Blue Law” was passed in Pennsylvania, which caused great hardship on the Sabbatarian churches. Richard Bond of the Nottingham church was required to serve jury duty, and when the case continued, he refused to serve beyond Friday night.²²

Manner of Life — Unusual Christians

The Philadelphia Movement churches had many of the Quaker habits of life, speech, and belief. They dressed plainly, spoke directly and simply, and refused to take oaths and engage in war.

Elhanan Winchester, a London minister, wrote of them in 1788: “Such Christians I have never seen as they are, who take the Scriptures as their only guide, in matters both of faith and practice . . . [they] are so afraid of doing anything contrary to the commands of Christ, that no temptations would prevail upon them even to sue any person at law . . . They are industrious, sober, temperate, kind, charitable people . . . They read much, they sing and pray much . . . they walk in the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless: both in public and private, they bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord . . . and whatsoever they believe their Savior commands, they practice without enquiring what others do.”²³

Erstwhile Southern Sabbath-keeping Churches

(1) Broad River, South Carolina. In 1754, a group of Pennsylvania and New Jersey Sabbatarians emigrated to South Carolina and organized a church on the Broad River, St. Mark’s Parish, some 180 miles from Charleston, near present Manning, South Carolina. The leading members were “Rev.” John Gregory and his two sons, Richard and John, from Piscataway, and Thomas Owen and Victor Nelly from Nantmeal (French Creek), Pennsylvania. In 1770, these Sabbatarians, Calvinistic in sentiment, numbered 18 families

and 24 members. Their preacher was Israel Zeymore, who later deserted them and went into the army.

In 1769 or 1770, it is reported that eight other families joined them from Chester (now Delaware) County, Pennsylvania. Principle family names were Price, Hughes, Johnston, Owen, Jackson, Gregory, Nelly, Seymour, and Noble. Records of this church disappear before the Revolutionary War.

(2) Tuckaseeking, Georgia. In 1759, “Rev.” Richard Gregory led eight families into Tuckaseeking, forty miles north of Savannah, and there organized a Sabbatarian church. In 1765 it appears that most of the party moved across the Savannah River and settled at Edisto, South Carolina.

Records of these Sabbatarians vanish with the Revolutionary War, but traces of Sabbatarian influence were left in the South, especially in North Carolina.²⁴

Philadelphia’s Part in Westward Migration

The Sabbatarian church in Lost Creek, (West) Virginia, established in 1805, was made up largely of the descendants of the Nottingham church. Some of the Nottingham Sabbatarians also moved to Woodbridgetown, Pennsylvania, and the North and South Fork of the Hughes River. Others moved to Salem, West Virginia, where Sabbatarian churches were organized. Enoch David, son of Owen David of Wales, preached also at Pennepek, and moved later to Woodbridgetown, where he soon died.²⁵

Influence of Davis Family

Enoch David and William Davis, two leading Sabbatarian ministers, were of Welsh descent. Welsh influence among Sabbatarian Baptists may parallel that among the first-day Baptists, in replacing Arminian philosophy with Calvinism.²⁶ Davis played a powerful role in shaping the future of Sabbatarian Baptists. It has been stated that William Davis has never lacked a direct descendant as a Seventh Day Baptist minister, and the denomination today is studded with his descendants. Corliss Fitz Randolph, the late

“official” historian, was a descendant of Davis and colored his view of history in favor of his ancestor.

V. The Piscataway Movement

Close on the heels of and intimately associated with the Newport and Philadelphia centers was the Sabbatarian center of Piscataway, New Jersey. Here a church began in 1705, which soon led to the formation of sister churches and engaged in westward migration in conjunction with other Sabbatarians.

Edward Dunham — Forming of Piscataway Church

A first-day Baptist church, the first in Jersey, was founded at Piscataway in the seventeenth century, probably by Thomas Chillingworth, the minister who is believed to have baptized Abel Noble.

Around 1700, Edmund Dunham, a deacon and licensed preacher of the church, reproved his brother-in-law, Hezekiah Bonham, for working on Sunday. Dunham was challenged by Bonham to prove it was a sin to work on Sunday; he seriously investigated the subject and became convinced the Sabbath was still binding. The whole community was stirred by the Sabbath question, as Dunham was a respected and influential member of the community. The result was of necessity a separation, similar to the experience of Mumford at Newport.²⁷

At Benjamin Martin’s home in Piscataway, on August 19, 1705, a church of 17 members was formed. Dunham was chosen elder and (ordained 1745 at Free West by William Gibson and Noble) 1745-1777 meeting there on October 22, 1705 (N.S., the FT was October 3-10), Dunham was ordained by prayer and laying on of hands by Elder William Gibson.²⁸ [Dugger says it was September 5 (O.S.).]

Piscataway’s Stormy History

The old Piscataway church book relates its founding as, “The Church of God, keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ, living in Piscataway and Hopewell”²⁹ Meetings were held in private homes until 1736, when a church building was constructed on land donated by Jonathan Fitz Randolph.³⁰

In the ninth and last of the articles of faith adopted by the church at its founding, the signers stated: “We give up ourselves first unto the Lord, and to one another, to be guided and governed by one another according to the Word of God.”³¹ Yet soon they had a decided difficulty determining just what the Word of God meant!

In 1753, a schism split the church down the middle between Calvinists and Arminians; apparently the controversy was resolved in 1757.³²

However, the biggest controversy involved the Revolutionary War. Piscataway members “differed among themselves in relation to the justness of the war,” and the church actually broke up for a number of years. Some of the members joined the patriot army, some fled to the mountains to the north, and some stayed to have their farms devastated by the war machine. Elder Jonathan Jarman left to form a new church in Pennsylvania, and the only other minister died in 1777.³³

Piscataway Ministers

Edmund Dunham 1705-1734
Jonathan Dunham, son 1734-1745
(licensed only)

Jonathan Jarman 1772-1776
(no pastor) 1777-1786
(a Sunday preacher, Elisha Gillette from Long Island, Enoch David from Philadelphia, and James Dunn, a local licentiate, sometimes preached)

Nathan Rogers 1786-1797
(from New London (Waterford), Connecticut; moved to Petersburg, New York, in 1797)

Henry McLafferty 1797-1811³⁴

Yearly Meeting — Relationship with London

A letter dated August 27, 1743, was addressed, "To the Churches of Christ of the same faith, usually holding their yearly meeting at Piscataway," and was signed by Robert Cornthwaite, and others of the Mill Yard Church. Thus it can be inferred that Piscataway had its own yearly meeting and that London considered her a sister church.³⁵

Connection with Other Sabbath Keepers

Piscataway was intimately tied with the Newport and Philadelphia centers. Jonathan Davis and Abel Noble seem to have been active in introducing the Sabbath question to New Jersey. Noble is said to have first preached Sabbatarianism in New Jersey "about and before 1700."³⁶

Seventh Day Baptist history states that it is probable that both Noble and Dunham accepted the Sabbath as a result of the teaching and practice of Elders William Gillette and Jonathan Davis.

Dr. William Gillette was a Huguenot (French Protestant) minister and physician from France who fled to America at the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1698). He learned English and preached in Connecticut and, it is said, on Long Island and in New Jersey as well. He was a Sabbath-keeping member of the Baptist church, and it is believed that during this time he influenced Jonathan Davis to keep the Sabbath.³⁷

Jonathan Davis, of the Davis Welsh clan, migrated to Massachusetts and New Jersey from Glamorganshire, Wales in 1662, and seems to have embraced the Sabbath before he moved to Trenton in 1695. Either he got it from Noble or Noble and he both received the Sabbath from Rhode Islanders.³⁸

Cohansey (Shiloh) Church

From 1695 to 1700 and later, Jonathan Davis visited his Welsh cousins in southern New Jersey, gaining many converts to the Sabbath. Augmented by converts from the Cohansey Baptist church, and Sabbath-keepers from Pennsylvania and Piscataway, the Davises

joined to form a church on April 7, 1737 (N.S.), called Cohansey, later Shiloh. The first minister was Jonathan Davis, nephew of the original Jonathan Davis.

Jonathan Davis 1737-1769
Jonathan Davis 1769-1785
(no relation)
Nathan Ayars 1785-1802

Shiloh's covenant was the same as that of Piscataway (see Chapter XII). In 1811, the church was still continuing the customs of laying on of hands and of washing feet. It differed from other Sabbath churches in that many of its members began the Sabbath at midnight, while others who knew it should begin at sunset "charitably" allowed their brothers to continue their wrong practice. The question of when to begin the Sabbath was also agitated among Sabbath Adventists during the 1850s.

In 1823, the Shiloh church sent its pastor, Elder John Davis, with Deacon John Bright, on a missionary tour into Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and Indiana.³⁹

Other Churches of the Piscataway Movement

Through Piscataway as the mother church, another church began at Oyster Pond, Long Island, with Elder Elisha Gillett. He joined the Piscataway church in 1769 but continued to live on Long Island. Upon request of the Piscataway church during its yearly meeting of 1786, Gillette was ordained by Elder William Bliss of Newport, Elder John Burdick of Hopkinton, and Elder Nathan Rogers (who in 1787 became pastor of Piscataway). Gillette soon organized a Sabbath church on Long Island, which in 1791 was recognized as a sister church of Piscataway. The church was short-lived, for it made the fatal mistake of admitting into membership Sunday keepers, and soon dissolved.

In 1811 a church in Salem County, known as the Marlboro church, was organized. In 1838, Piscataway members organized the Plainfield church, which for long was the Seventh Day Baptist headquarters and location of the church archives.⁴⁰ (Now, headquarters is

in Janesville, Wisconsin.)

Westward Ho!

Along with the Shrewsbury church, some Piscataway members were part of the westward migration after the Revolutionary War. Considering the devastating conditions produced by the war, it is not strange that many desired to move to less populated areas.

In 1789 the Woodbridgetown church in Fayette County, Pennsylvania was organized largely from Piscataway church members who had migrated to western Pennsylvania. Among them was Samuel Fitz Randolph, who later founded a church in Salem, West Virginia.

James Dunn in the late 1700s led a group of Piscataway Sabbath keepers to Meadville, Crawford County, Pennsylvania (in the Erie region), where a church named Shiloh was organized.⁴¹

Considering the 1823 missionary tour of Elder John Davis and Deacon John Bright into Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, and Indiana, it appears that migration of Sabbath keepers quickly spread to the southwest.

VI. Shrewsbury — Emigration Church

The establishing of the Shrewsbury church appears to be the result of several migratory groups. In 1735, John Culver and family, plus twenty-one other *Rogerenes* (an independent group of Sabbath-keepers, distinct from regular Seventh Day Baptists), emigrated from Groton, Connecticut, to Morris County, New Jersey. Later in 1738, they moved to Waretown, Barnegat Bay, Monmouth County, New Jersey. They may have been joined by other Sabbatarians from Oyster Pond, Long Island; Saybrook, Connecticut; and Westerly, Rhode Island. The Rogerenes moved back to Morris County in 1749.

In the fall of 1744, Peter Miller, famous pastor of the German Seventh Day Baptist church in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, visited various Sabbath-keepers along the route of a pilgrimage to New England. The company of Sabbath-keepers he met at Barnegat (fifty miles south of Shrewsbury) was said to have come from Stonington, Connecticut, and Westerly, Rhode Island, a few years before.

This group was joined by a few Sabbatarians from Pennsylvania. They had formed a church covenant, but were without a pastor. Peter Miller's preaching at Barnegat resulted in a church being organized in 1745, with William Davis, age 81, elected pastor.

Davis, who had previously been a Sabbatarian preacher in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, died soon after his election as pastor of the Shrewsbury congregation. In 1743, both his son John Davis, and Thomas Hiscox, were chosen elders in Westerly but refused to serve (not an uncommon occurrence). In 1745, John Davis is mentioned as a member of the original Shrewsbury church, indicating that he had probably joined the flow of emigration south and west. After William Davis' death, John Davis was sent in 1746 to Westerly for ordination. He pastored Shrewsbury from 1747 to 1752.

Then, for over twenty years, the Shrewsbury church had no pastor. Finally, in 1775, Jacob Davis, grandson of William Davis, was ordained as pastor and served until 1789, when the church as a whole moved to New Salem, Virginia (now known as Salem, West Virginia), by way of Woodbridgetown, Pennsylvania.⁴²

Distinguishing Tenets of Shrewsbury

The church in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, generally followed Westerly, Rhode Island, in doctrine and practice. Here are some of its distinguishing beliefs:

1. Shrewsbury held communion once in two months, or quarterly, as Westerly did in 1775.

2. Its articles of faith (1774) stated that a "company of sincere persons being found in the faith and practice of the above said things may truly be said to be the church of God." The term "Church of God" is found in several other documents of the church.

3. Shrewsbury differed from "the church of Christ in Westerly," in observing footwashing (1750). This practice was kept by some in West Virginia, where Shrewsbury members had migrated.⁴³

4. It appointed and ordained "ruling elders," who assisted the pastor and acted as arbitrators, settling and adjusting all differences

between members. Individual members were not to sue each other at law but go before the elders; there was no appeal from the church's decisions. Straying or backsliding members often had to appear before church committees to answer for their deeds. This practice, which indicates "rulership from the top down," was in some cases continued in West Virginia.⁴⁴

5. Shrewsbury was split by the Revolutionary War. Jacob Davis served also as chaplain in the Continental Army, and many members followed their pastor in joining the conflict. At least one, Simeon Maxson, violently disagreed and was temporarily banned from communion (September, 1776) for condemning the church members as "children of the devil" for supporting carnal warfare.⁴⁵

Big Move to Virginia....

Impoverished and decimated by the Revolutionary War, the Shrewsbury church sold their church building and on September 6, 1789, moved as a body to Woodbridgetown, Pennsylvania, and soon thereafter to New Salem, Virginia, on land donated by William Fitz Randolph. It is probable that the Shrewsbury emigrants were joined by recruits from Piscataway, New Jersey.⁴⁶

And Further West

Some Sabbatarians had moved from Shrewsbury to southwestern Pennsylvania and western Virginia as early as 1774. After the Revolutionary War, small colonies went even farther west, into Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska.

Near the close of the war, other members of the Rhode Island churches were migrating to Berlin, New York. By 1797 there was a church established at Brookfield, New York. Sabbath-keepers soon spread into western New York, and elsewhere. From the Newport and Piscataway movements sprang churches of Sabbath-keepers in northern, central, and western New York, northern Pennsylvania, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas and western Nebraska.⁴⁷

Thus it was that a Sabbatarian influence lingered on in these regions well into the mid-1800s and even later, after many Seventh Day

Baptist churches became defunct. Western New York, Ohio, Wisconsin (and Michigan), and Iowa were key regions from which sprang Sabbath Adventists (and later, the Seventh Day Church of God). It is not surprising that these areas were previously influenced by Seventh Day Baptist preaching.

VII. West Virginia — An Enticing Enigma

Because Corliss Fitz Randolph (descendant of William Davis) has written the only extant detailed history of the West Virginia Seventh Day Baptist churches, knowledge of this important area of Sabbath-keepers is colored to his viewpoint. Nevertheless, Randolph reveals some very interesting information concerning the beliefs and practices of Sabbatarian Baptists, and creates incentive to examine the original records in Janesville, Wisconsin, to find more information.

Samuel Fitz Randolph — Western Pioneer

Samuel Fitz Randolph was a member of the Piscataway church who served in the Revolutionary War. In 1785 he purchased land in what is now Fayette County, Pennsylvania. (Later he bought land in the vicinity of present-day Salem, West Virginia, then a wilderness.) Sometime between 1785 and 1790 he and several Piscataway members and a few converts to the Sabbath moved to Woodbridgetown, Pennsylvania, where his land was located.

On November 8, 1789, a Seventh Day Baptist church (it termed itself the "Seventh Day Baptist Church of Christ") was formed, although it was not fully organized until June 6, 1790. The first pastor, namesake of the town, was Samuel Woodbridge. Woodbridgetown has been termed the "gateway to Western Virginia for early Seventh Day Baptist immigrants."⁴⁸

Assisting in the formation of the Woodbridgetown church was Jacob Davis, pastor of the Shrewsbury church, who was enroute to western Virginia.

Woodbridgetown Church — Corrupt

The twenty-two articles of the

Woodbridgetown church covenant were similar to those of Shrewsbury. On August 8, 1790, the church decided to have communion quarterly, on the third Sabbath in September, December, March and June. "Wine" (which may have actually been grape juice) was used for communion.

Samuel Woodbridge's 1799 will, in which he gave half an acre to the church, describes such beliefs as (1) Holy Trinity, (2) fall of man, and (3) eternal happiness of the saints in heaven and torments of the wicked in hell. (Were these common Seventh Day Baptist beliefs at the time?)

Other ministers who served at Woodbridgetown were John Patterson, later pastor at New Salem, and Enoch David (of the church in Nantmeal, Pennsylvania), who in 1809 divided pastoral duties with Woodbridge.

The Woodbridgetown church became extinct some time after 1844.⁴⁹

New Salem Church — Dissension Prevalent

Internal dissension and squabbling seemed to be a way of life in the West Virginia churches. The church in New Salem, Virginia (later, Salem, West Virginia) was certainly no exception.

Exactly when the Shrewsbury settlers arrived in western Virginia is not known. They originally settled on the West Fork of the Monongahela River but soon became dissatisfied with the land and moved to the present Salem, settling on land donated by Samuel Fitz Randolph.

Jacob Davis, their pastor, died in 1793, and on March 8, 1795, the church voted John Patterson as their pastor. In 1801 John Davis was ordained pastor of the Salem church by Woodbridge and Patterson. In 1803 Patterson was banned from communion for lack of church loyalty. Dissension was rife and "Awful Sentences of Excommunication," as they were called, were issued as late as 1822.

In 1808 the Salem church became a member of the newly formed Seventh Day Baptist General Conference.⁵⁰

Yearly and Quarterly Meetings

Church records show that communion was

observed at New Salem quarterly. On December 28, 1815, it was decided that quarterly meetings, which were times for communion, would be continued. On May 14, 1819, it was voted that quarterly business meetings be held on the Sunday preceding the communion service (always held on Saturday).

Later, for thirty-seven years, 1822 to 1859, church meetings were held on the Friday preceding communion Saturday. Afterwards, church meetings were changed back to Sunday of the week preceding communion.

Yearly meetings were also held. On August 16, 1822, it was voted that the yearly meeting be held on the third Sabbath in September. Apparently the Salem church was the headquarters for all the West Virginia churches, although others may have had their own yearly meetings. On August 19, 1859, New Salem received a request from the Lost Creek church for the two churches to have a joint yearly meeting on the third Sabbath in August.⁵¹

Peter Davis — Controversial Figure

Peter Davis, great-grandson of William Davis, was born in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, in 1783, and came to Virginia at the age of six. He was a soldier in the War of 1812.⁵²

Davis was granted a license to preach at New Salem in 1819 (he entered the church in 1807) and was ordained in December of 1823 by John Davis and John Greene. Another of the Davis clan, Lewis A. Davis, was ordained by John Greene in January of 1824. Peter Davis assisted John Davis in pastoring the New Salem church while Lewis A. Davis conducted missionary work in western Virginia and later in Ohio. Peter Davis worked with Elder Greene in the Lost River area of western Virginia.⁵³

In 1825, Peter Davis was charged with preaching a new doctrine which the church did not approve. The church records of 1827 report that Davis maintained that the church did not understand his views, whereupon a committee was appointed to examine him. Apparently the key issue was Davis' views on the immortality of the soul. (What his views were on this subject is not known.) The church committee approved Davis, and he was fully

restored to his former standing. However, in 1834 Peter Davis, along with Ezekiel Bee, was again in trouble with the church.⁵⁴

Salem church records for 1831 to 1847 are lost; a new record book was begun in 1847. Peter Davis was recorded as still being retained as pastor, John Davis had died in 1842, leaving Peter Davis the sole pastor.

About 1856 to 1858, Peter Davis declined to officiate at communion services. The reason, it is reported, was that he said it was “fulfilled and passed away” and no longer binding. Communion was omitted a few times, but was soon resumed because the church was not favorable to the new doctrine. On November 16, 1860, Davis was excused from the active pastorate by the church, apparently still holding to his views on communion. New Salem records have been tampered with, making it difficult to determine just what his communion views were; the historian Randolph does not give the complete story.⁵⁵

With the passing of Peter Davis, Randolph states, “Thus harmlessly died away the last ripple of doctrinal excitement that disturbed the serenity of the church.”⁵⁶

West Fork River Church — Fraternizing With Unbelievers

Organized with five members in 1793, the West Fork River church attempted to enter the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference in 1808, but the church was rejected, because it invited Sunday observers to partake of its communion. The church rapidly declined afterwards. Its remaining Sabbath-keeping members eventually joined the Lost Creek church.⁵⁷

Lost Creek Church — Truth Almost Lost

In Harrison County, Virginia, a church was formed on October 27, 1805, composed chiefly of the Bond family, which had migrated from Cecil, Maryland (the Nottingham Sabbath-keeping church), along with others from New Salem living in the area.

The Lost Creek Church Covenant reads, “The Church of Christ on Lost Creek, in the observance of God’s Holy Sanctified Seventh Day-Sabbath . . .” Its twenty-two articles of

faith were the same as Shrewsbury’s.⁵⁸

John Davis pastored Lost Creek as well as Salem. From 1815 to 1830, Davis apparently had some unexplained differences with several Lost Creek members.⁵⁹

On June 20, 1806, the church decided to have communion three times a year, on the last Sabbath in March, July, and November. The Sunday preceding communion Sabbath was set aside for the regular business meeting of the church. Also, the Friday before each communion day was made a day of prayer and fasting.

In September of 1815, the church rejected the idea of open communion. In 1821, the Calvinism controversy split the Lost Creek church wide open. In Lost Creek as well as in other Virginia Sabbatarian churches, internal dissension was common. Missionaries from Cohansey (Shiloh), New Jersey, Elder John Davis and Deacon John Bright, gave advice on the serious dispute. Finally on December 30, 1821, new articles of faith were adopted and peace was restored.

Later, the church was split over the question of whether or not to ordain licentiate William Williams. A minority with Williams withdrew, ordaining him and seizing the meeting house. The Williams group in September of 1834 applied unsuccessfully for admission to the General Conference. In April, 1835, they petitioned the old church for a reconciliation but were rebuffed. Randolph reports that the old Lost Creek members built a new meeting place, and the minority group gradually died away.⁶⁰

The original Lost Creek church became a member of the General Conference in 1808, despite the fact that it was the only Sabbatarian church to allow slaveholders in its membership. The church held a yearly meeting of its own on the first Sabbath of October until 1859, when the church’s annual meeting was combined with that of New Salem.⁶¹

Middle Island Church — Grave Internal Dissensions

A church at Middle Island (later known as Lewisport, and presently West Union), western Virginia, was organized in 1831 or 1832,

composed of New Salem members living west of the city. Numerous members of the Bee family were in this church.

Organized under the direction of Elder John Davis of New Salem and Joel Greene, a Sabbatarian missionary from the East, Middle Island had only one pastor of its own until 1867. That minister was Ezekiel Bee, who became associated with the church in 1845 and served for only a few years. The Middle Island church depended upon New Salem ministers and traveling missionaries to deliver sermons. When there was no preacher, members met in private homes for Sabbath worship.

Randolph castigates the church for its “grave internal dissensions . . . [which] grew out of the inability of many of its members to differentiate clearly between the civil statute and ecclesiastical law.” Middle Island had doctrinal disputes similar to those in New Salem and was said to have ideas of “revolting literalism” of the Bible. Randolph declines to say just what was so revolting about this church.

In August, 1866, a meeting was held to resuscitate the church, which for years “had rested in a state of apparent hopeless inactivity.” In 1867 James B. Davis was ordained pastor and an declaration of faith was adopted.

From its beginning in 1832, the Middle Island church was a member of the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference.⁶²

North Fork Church

Meager records show that the church at the North Fork of the Hughes River originated in 1833. Lewis Bond, born in Cecil County, Maryland, in 1780, moved to the North Fork of the Hughes River in western Virginia in 1813. Bond was visited by Seventh Day Baptist missionaries in 1833, among whom was Alexander Campbell. Campbell’s revival in the area resulted in a church being organized of eight to nine members, four of whom were of the Bond family. Lewis Bond was ordained deacon, was licensed, and became acting pastor.

In 1837 the North Fork church became a member of the Western Association of Seventh Day Baptist Churches and, accordingly, a

member of the General Conference. At this time, the church still had only nine members. It became extinct before 1851.⁶³

South Fork of Hughes River — A Ray of Truth

Peter Davis is reported as having baptized a considerable number at both Hughes River and Middle Island, western Virginia, in 1818 and 1819.

However, the definite beginning of a Sabbatarian church at the South Fork of the Hughes River stems from the revival meetings of Seventh Day Baptist evangelist Alexander Campbell in 1833. After converting a number to the Sabbath near present-day Pennsboro, West Virginia, and visiting Lewis Bond there, Campbell came to Quiet Dell, where he publicly debated a local Methodist minister, Tichnell, on the Sabbath question. Great throngs from the countryside attended the debates, and among the listeners several embraced the Sabbath. These converts were organized into a Sabbath church about 1834.

Peter Davis organized the church at the South Fork of the Hughes River, baptizing the nine original members, three Starkeys and six Lowthers. They began keeping the Sabbath on the first Sabbath in June of 1834; the church was constituted on July 13. Since Davis was pastor of the New Salem church, he could not stay at Hughes River for long. However, he and other ministers from time to time visited the Hughes River congregation.

Asa Bee was received into the South Fork church on May 7, 1839, and on August 29, 1842, was elected pastor, serving until his death. Asa Bee is known in church records as “The Elder.” He came from another Sabbatarian church, probably Middle Island.

The church record book begins on January 25, 1842, with the words, “We, the Seventh Day Baptist Church of the South Fork of Hughes River . . .” Its records also include use of the term “Church of Christ,” but the records are scanty, and there are none at all from June 17, 1860 to February 12, 1868. For many years, the church business meetings were kept secret, and members who violated the secrecy were severely disciplined.⁶⁴

Unique “Mosaic” Practices

The reason for the secrecy of the church can well be understood from reports of what they observed and practiced. Randolph laments, “In short here an attempt was made to apply the provisions of the Mosaic law governing the domestic life of the early Hebrews to American Seventh-day Baptists”⁶⁵

A few of their practices are listed as follows:

1. Pork was banned. Mutton and beef tallow took the place of lard; the more wealthy used olive oil.

2. The church stressed simplicity in dress and restricted frills and adornments. Numerous members were excommunicated for violating church-established dress codes. There were even rules for dress of the dead, style of coffin, and dress of the bride and groom.

3. Rules of courtship and dating were imposed.

4. The church told parents how to rear their children. A Sabbath school was organized probably as early as 1842, the first among Seventh Day Baptist churches. This practice did not become general until the latter 1860s in other churches.

5. The first meeting house built by the church, completed December 19, 1852, was designed to be used as a schoolhouse when not used for worship. As there was no free public school system in the area until after the Civil War, the church operated its own school, and “members of the church were commanded by that body to prepare themselves for teaching at some specified future time.”

6. If a father died, his family and property were placed under the supervision of the church.

7. “Investigating meetings” were held to ensure that the members would remain a peculiar people.

8. The church was governed “from the top down;” the elders were definitely in charge.

9. From questions for discussion submitted to the Virginia Seventh Day Baptist Association by the Hughes River church, it may be ascertained that they believed they were the only true Christians, that it was wrong

for a Christian to hold public office, that tithing was commanded, and that it was wrong for Christians to marry non-Christians.

10. From the South Fork records, “March 20, 1853, it was voted that communion service be held once in twelve months on the fourteenth day of the first Jewish month, i.e., on the evening of the Passover.”

11. Footwashing was observed by the South Fork church and some of the other churches in western Virginia. It had been a Shrewsbury practice.

12. The South Fork church withdrew fellowship from the General Conference and all other Seventh Day Baptist organizations, because of doctrinal differences.

¹SDB, 602.

²SDB, 602-3, 613.

³David S. Katz, *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), 168.

⁴Cited in Katz, 175.

⁵SDB, 616.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Clarke, 23-28.

⁸Denison, 65.

⁹Griffiths, 518-19.

¹⁰James Bailey, *History of the Seventh-Day Baptist General Conference, from Its Origin, September 1802, to Its Fifty-Third Session, September 1865* (Toledo: S. Bailey and Company, 1866), 12-13.

¹¹SDB, 124-25.

¹²SDB, 140 (?).

¹³SDB, 668.

¹⁴SDB, 124-25, 660 (?); Henry C. Vedder, *A History of the Baptists in the Middle States* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1808), page unknown.

¹⁵SDB, 670.

¹⁶SDB, 670-71.

¹⁷SDB, 672-73.

¹⁸SDB, 671-673.

¹⁹SDB, 130.

²⁰SDB, 672-73, 607

²¹Griffiths, 518-19.

²²SDB, 673-74.

²³SDB, 674.

²⁴SDB, 152-53, 674-75; Benjamin F. Riley, *A History of the Baptists in the Southern States East of the Mississippi* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1898), 339.

²⁵Bailey, 13-15.

²⁶Vedder, 93.

²⁷SDB, 125; Clarke, 31-32.

²⁸SDB, 130, 667.

²⁹*Seventh Day Baptist Memorial*, Vol II, 121, cited in Dugger, 275.

³⁰Clarke 31-32.

³¹SDB, 685.

³²Vedder, 52.

³³SDB, 677.

³⁴SDB, 130-32, 678-79; Clarke, 31-34.

³⁵Bailey, 12-13.

³⁶Griffiths, 518-19.

³⁷SDB, 132, 150.

³⁸SDB, 676, 683.

³⁹Clarke, 37-38; SDB, 685.

⁴⁰SDB, 681-82, 132.

⁴¹SDB, 678, 686.

⁴²SDB, 1279, 638-39; Corliss Fitz Randolph, *A History of Seventh Day Baptists in West Virginia* (Plainfield, New Jersey: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1905), 1043-45.

⁴³Randolph, 39-40.

⁴⁴Theodore L. Gardiner *History of the Salem Seventh-Day Baptist Church*, (Alfred Center, New York: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1892), 11-13.

⁴⁵SDB, 639.

⁴⁶SDB, 826.

⁴⁷Whitford, 72.

⁴⁸SDB, 826-32.

⁴⁹Randolph, 73-82; SDB, 831-33.

⁵⁰SDB, 834-36.

⁵¹Randolph, 100-101.

⁵²Randolph, 112-13.

⁵³Gardiner, 21-23.

⁵⁴Randolph, 112-13.

⁵⁵Randolph, 95-97, 112-13.

⁵⁶SDB, 837.

⁵⁷SDB, 844.

⁵⁸Randolph, 146.

⁵⁹SDB, 844-50.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹Randolph, 383.

⁶²SDB, 850-53.

⁶³SDB, 853-54.

⁶⁴Gardiner, 22; Randolph, 199-201; SDB, 859.

⁶⁵SDB, 855-59, 887-88; Randolph, 199-209; Clarke, 64.