

SABBATARIAN BAPTISTS
IN AMERICA

by

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Important Ideas

“The ground of our difference is, that you and others deny God’s law” (**William Hiscox** in response to Sunday-keeping Baptists, 1671).

“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,” (**John Rogers**, December 22, 1675 letter to Samuel Hubbard).

“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 practise without enquiring what others do” (Elhanan Winchester, writing of “Philadelphia Movement” Sabbatarians, 1788).

“The Church of God, keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ, living in Piscataway and Hopewell [New Jersey] . . .” (**Piscataway church** book, early 1700s).

“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,” (church records of **South Fork, western Virginia**).

“No fact is more fully established than that Sunday and its associate festivals [Christmas, Easter, Whitsunday, etc.] came into Christianity through pagan influence” (**1892 SDB tract**).

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Sabbatarian Baptists in America

I. Earliest Sabbath-Keepers

Who was the first Sabbath-keeper in America? It is not known, but the first *recorded* Sabbatarian was Stephen Mumford, who came to America in 1664. There may have been others prior to Mumford, for as early as 1646, Sabbath discussion embroiled New England. Some of the earliest books published in America (see footnotes) supported the keeping of the seventh day Sabbath.¹

The Baptist historian Griffiths reports that the earliest Sabbath-keepers were at Newport, Rhode Island, in 1644: "It is said that in the province of Rhode Island, there were adherents of that faith [Sabbath keepers] at its early settlement contemporary with the founding of the first Baptist church."² The church organized by Mumford in 1671 was the first church of the "Sabbatarian Baptists" in America. Yet, "it appears, however, that there were already in existence in New England at the time some thirty other Seventh-Day Baptist churches, although they were not so named."³

Another writer, a Seventh-day Adventist, also mentions thirty other Sabbatarian churches in New England prior to Mumford's coming. Some of these were said to have sprung from seven known Churches of God (seventh day) in London at the time of the Puritan migrations to the New World. They also used the name, "Church of God," a name still retained by several groups.⁴

Where were these thirty other churches? Did they keep the seventh day Sabbath — or the Puritan Sabbath, which was Sunday? These are as yet unanswered questions, yet a continuous thread of Sabbatarian history can be

traced from seventeenth-century England to modern America. The purpose of this paper is to trace a portion of that history.

Baptist and Puritan history of the United States and England is complex and fragmentary owing to the independent nature of the many and varied groups. Benedict, in his Baptist history (1848), mentions the existence of "numerous little societies of Sabbath-keepers who are accustomed to meet weekly for prayer and conference, but who have not yet been organized into regular churches."⁵ With so many independent little groups, it is no wonder history tells so little about despised sects of Sabbath-keepers.

Pre-Beginnings

In 1639, Roger Williams, a Separatist minister, established a Baptist church at Providence, Rhode Island. In 1644, John Clark established a Baptist church at Newport, Rhode Island. In the Providence church, a division occurred in 1652 over the question of laying on of hands upon every member of the church after baptism. Ten years before, English Baptists had adopted the opinion that every

¹*Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America* (Plainfield, New Jersey: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1910), 149. (Hereafter this source is referred to as "SDB.")

²Thomas S. Griffiths, *A History of Baptists in New Jersey* (Hightstown, New Jersey: Barr Press Publishing Company, 1904), 518.

³Robert G. Torbet in *The American Church of the Protestant Heritage*, Vergilius Ferm, ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 199.

man who had a gift to preach also had a right to baptize, even before he was ordained in any church. Some in Providence apparently also held to this. William Wickenden was the chief leader of part of the Providence church which held to the laying on of hands no matter who baptized. In 1652, the question of laying on of hands on every new member also arose in the Newport first-day Baptist Church. A second church was formed here in 1656: it believed in laying hands on every member.⁶

II. Stephen Mumford and the Newport Church

In 1664, Stephen Mumford of the Bell Lane Sabbatarian Church in London emigrated to Newport, Rhode Island. He was originally from Tewkesbury. For some unknown reason, it has been reported that Mumford was sent by the Bell Lane Church although he was not a minister. As there was no Sabbatarian church in Newport, he affiliated (associated) with the first-day Baptist Church there.

Why did Mumford come? Bearing in mind the 1661 execution of the Sabbatarian preacher John James and persecution of Sabbatarians in England at that time, it is amazing that there is record of no other than Mumford to flee to the New World for religious freedom to observe the Sabbath. Mumford may have been induced to come by Dr. John Clarke, pastor of the first-day Newport Baptist Church, who was agent of the colony to the court of King Charles II. The king's charter held by Clarke granted "unlimited toleration in religion" to all people of Rhode Island. Mumford could thus be escaping religious persecution by coming to the New World.⁷

What were Mumford's beliefs? We have only this brief record: "He brought with him the opinion the Ten Commandments as they were delivered from Mt. Sinai, were moral and immutable and that it was an unchristian power which changed the Sabbath from the Seventh to the first day of the week."⁸

Others Join

Mumford did not succumb to Sunday-keeping, nor did he keep his Sabbath beliefs to himself. Apparently on October 6, 1665, he

wrote to several Sabbatarian churches in England for advice.

The first of his "converts," called "the first person upon the continent to begin the observance of the Bible Sabbath . . . was a woman, Tacy Hubbard, wife of Samuel Hubbard, who commenced its observance a little later."⁹ Hubbard was one of the leading members of the Newport church, and was also a lifelong friend and associate of Roger Williams. Later Williams wrote Hubbard the following: ". . . after all that I have seen and read and compared about the seventh day . . . I cannot be removed from Calvin's mind, and indeed Paul's mind, Colossians 2, that all those Sabbaths of seven days were figures, types and shadows, and forerunners of the Son of God . . . [and ceased with the resurrection]. Accordingly I have read many, but see no satisfying answer to those three Scriptures, chiefly, Acts 20, I Corinthians 16, Revelation 1."¹⁰

The Hubbards joined Mumford in Sabbath observance in 1665. The group increased with Ruth Burdick, wife of Robert, in 1666, and Rachel Langworthy (daughter of the Hubbards), wife of Andrew, and Bethiah and Joseph Clark in 1667, living in Misquamacut, Rhode Island. Apparently they continued to go to church on Sunday, but also met in private homes on Saturday. Others who embraced the Sabbath were William Hiscox, Roger Baster, Nicholas Wild and wife, and John Solomon and wife.

In 1667, the Sabbath group petitioned the general assembly of the First Baptist Church to have market day changed from Sabbath to Thursday. Instead, both days were made market days.

Persecution and Falling Away

Elders John Clarke, Mark Luther, Joseph Lorey, and Obadiah Holmes, as leaders in the first-day church, began to preach against the Sabbath-keepers, denouncing them as heretics and schismatics. Clarke taught that the whole of the Ten Commandments were done away.

It may have been in January or February of 1669 that the Wilds and Salmons (Solomons) deserted the Sabbath-keepers, returning to sole Sunday worship. This act caused great

consternation among the rest of the Sabbath-keepers. The question that plagued their minds was, "Should we continue to take communion with a church that includes apostates?" In other words, they were willing to fellowship with Sunday keepers, but they questioned whether they should continue to fellowship with those who had once accepted the Sabbath but later rejected the Truth.

Advice From England

Dr. Edward Stennett of the Bell Lane Church in London wrote a letter to the Sabbath-keepers of Newport, dated February 2, 1668. They had apparently asked him for advice. He mentioned that there were nine or ten Sabbath-keeping churches left in England, plus many scattered disciples "in this tottering day, when many eminent churches have been shattered to pieces."¹¹ His advice was for them to carry the Sabbath truth "with all meekness and tenderness to our brethren who . . . differ from us."¹²

That same year, on March 26, came a letter on behalf of the Bell Lane Church, signed by eleven members, including William Gibson (their future elder). The Newport Sabbatarians had apparently written to them, asking for advice, and the reply began with this greeting: "The church of Christ, meeting in Bell Lane, London, upon the Lord's holy Sabbath . . . to a remnant of the Lord's Sabbath-keepers, in or about Newport in New England . . ." The advice was, not to be discouraged, for Sabbath-keepers will ride on the high places of the earth; be tender against differing brethren, and do not use harsh words against them.¹³

Joseph Davis, Sr.'s letter to the Newport Sabbath keepers from Oxford prison on January 26, 1670, laments the dead condition of the English churches. He was affiliated with the Mill Yard Church and also used the term, "Church of Christ." He was replying to a query they had sent him in September, 1669.¹⁴

Edward Stennett's letter of March 6, 1670, gives specific advice as to what the Sabbath-keepers should do:

"My dear friends, as for those that have drawn back from the Sabbath to profaneness . . . [you] must withdraw yourselves from them, as sinful and disorderly

persons: and if the [Baptist] church will hold communion with those apostates from the truth, you ought then to desire to be fairly dismissed from the church, which if the church refuse, you ought to withdraw yourselves, and not be partakers of other men's sins, but keep yourselves pure . . ."¹⁵

Newport — 1671 — First Sabbath-Keeping American Church

The situation remained fairly quiet from 1669 to 1671, but rose to a final climax beginning in June 1671 when Elder Holmes' sermon lambasted those who observed the Sabbath. Holmes said that the Ten Commandments were given to the Jews and were not binding on Gentiles; those who observed the seventh day were gone from Christ to Moses.¹⁶

The Sabbath-keepers had not always communed with the first-day Baptist church, but met on the Sabbath for "mutual encouragement and prayer." When the Sabbath-keepers absolutely refused to continue taking communion with the Sunday church, their case was brought to open trial. Hiscox especially was called on the carpet for not taking communion. The Sabbath keepers were now fed up with being attacked by the minister, and were grieved at the apostasy of the four who had turned back from the Sabbath, and also the fact that the elders taught that God's law was abolished. Hiscox told Holmes in one of the meetings: "The ground of our difference is, that you and others deny God's law."

Hiscox was charged with slandering the brethren in saying that they denied God's law, and slandering the former Sabbath-keepers as apostates. He was also condemned for working on Sunday before coming to church, and for breaking bread (communion?) on Saturday, and in so doing holding communion with those that were not in the church (the Mumfords).

Hiscox and the Hubbards, especially Tacy Hubbard, stoutly defended their position. For over six years the Sabbath-keepers had tried to keep the Sabbath and remain in a church which observed Sunday. The discussions resulted in a total deadlock. They had no recourse but to withdraw from the church, as Edward Stennett had advised. This they did on December 7,

1671.

A new church was formed, the first organization of Sabbath-keeping Christians in America known to exist. On December 23, 1671 (O.S.), William Hiscox, Stephen and Mrs. Mumford, Samuel and Tacy Hubbard, Roger Baster (or Baxter) and Rachel Langworthy entered into a church covenant. Hiscox was chosen pastor; there were no articles of faith except the Bible.

Newport Church — Connected with English Sabbatarians?

James Bailey, a noted Seventh Day Baptist historian, states unequivocally that the Newport Sabbatarian Church was not an offshoot of the First Baptist Church: "Stephen Mumford and Mrs. Mumford were not members of the Baptist Church. By them a connecting link in the line of succession was formed with the Seventh-day Baptists of England. The seceders from the Baptist Church joined with them. The Seventh-day Baptist Church of America is not, therefore, a branch rent from the Baptist Church, but was independent of that Church."¹⁷

Yet relations between the Sabbatarian and the Sunday Baptists were very cordial in the following years. Attempts were soon made to bring them together. Years later, the Seventh Day Newport Church was asked to send messengers to counsel with Baptist churches in settling internal Baptist problems.¹⁸

An attempt to show a tie between Newport and England has been made by Dugger and Dodd. They cite the letter of December 21, 1680, addressed to "New Port" from East Smithfield, London, where the Mill Yard Church was meeting, and state that the oldest Sabbath-keeping church in America was thus connected with the oldest in London.¹⁹

Yet Benedict, in his Baptist history, states that the Newport Sabbatarian Baptist Church was the sixth Baptist church in America, "and Baptists for several generations considered Seventh-day Baptist churches as regular Baptist churches." Backus calls the Newport Sabbatarian Church the Third Baptist Church of Newport.²⁰

Growth in membership was slow. There were less than 3,000 persons in the entire colony of Rhode Island, and there was much

Indian trouble as well as disputes between Massachusetts and Connecticut over boundaries. Joseph and Bethiah Clarke, Ruth Burdick, and Mrs. Maxson, wife of John Maxson (later the first pastor of the Westerly church), soon joined the covenant with the original seven. "Owing to the fact that the roll of the church for many years is not extant, if one was kept at all, it is difficult to tell in some cases who did belong to the church."²¹ Church records did not begin until 1692. However, in 1678, Samuel Hubbard reported that there were a total of 37 Sabbatarians in America: 20 in Newport, 7 at Westerly (originally called Misquamacut, later Hopkinton), and 10 at New London, Connecticut.²²

In 1681, there were 29 at Newport, 1 at Providence, 4 in Plymouth Colony, 5 at Martha's Vineyard (2 of whom were Indians), 1 at Narragansett, 7 at Westerly and 4 in New London. Seven in New London had left the church with differing doctrines and became the nucleus of the Rogerine Sabbatarians. Members were received by profession of faith, baptism, and laying on of hands.²³

Newport Ministers

William Hiscox, the first Newport Sabbatarian minister, served from 1671 to his death in 1704. When he was ordained, if indeed he was, is unknown.²⁴

In 1675, Mumford went to London, and on October 16, he returned with a new assistant elder, William Gibson of the Bell Lane Church. Gibson was probably already ordained when he arrived, for he first preached at New London and eventually settled at Westerly. Gibson worked effectively against the Rogerine sect, and upon Hiscox's death, he became full pastor.²⁵

1671-	William Hiscox	1671-
1704		
1675-	William Gibson	1675-
1717		
1718-	Joseph Crandall	1718-
1737		
		(son of
	Elder John Crandall, first minister of the Westerly church)	
	no regular pastor	1737-

1754

(Elders
Joseph Maxson and Thomas Hiscox
served occasionally)
John Maxson 1754-1778
William Bliss 1778-1808
Henry Burdick 1807-1843
(not formally installed
as pastor)

Ebenezer David, son of Elder Enoch David
of Pennsylvania, was ordained in Newport
church in 1775. He subsequently joined the
Continental Army as a chaplain and apparently
died in the army near Philadelphia in 1778.

⁷W.C. Whitford, *Historical Sketch of the Seventh-Day Baptist Churches in America* (Milton, Wisconsin: Milton College, no date), 71.

⁸A.H. Lewis, *History of Sabbath and Sunday* (Milton College Library), 218.

⁹SDB, 249.

¹⁰Backus, Vol. I, 411.

¹¹Henry Clarke, *A History of the Sabbatarians, or Seventh Day Baptists, in America* (Utica, New York: 1811), 10-11.

¹²*Seventh Day Baptist Memorial*, I, January 1852, 26-27.

¹³*Ibid.*, 24-26.

¹⁴*The Last Legacy, or the Autobiography and Religious Profession of Joseph Davis Senior*, Willaim Henry Black, ed. (London: Mill Yard Congregation, no date), 51-57.

¹⁵Cited in Backus, Vol. II, 601 (?).

¹⁶Joseph Belcher, *The Religious Denominations in the United States* (Philadelphia: J.E. Potter, 1854), 265.

⁴Harry W. Lowe, *Radio Church of God: How Its Teachings Differ from Seventh Day Adventists*, (Mountain

View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1970), 14-15; Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 64.

⁵David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and other Parts of the World* (New York: Lewis Colby and Company), 1848), 922.

⁶Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists* (Newton, Massachusetts: Backus Historical Society, 1871), 490-99.

¹⁷James Bailey, "History of the Origin and Growth of Sabbath-Keeping in America," *Seventh Day Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. I, January, 1884, 15.

¹⁸SDB, 599-600.

¹⁹Andrew N. Dugger and Clarence O. Dodd, *A History of the True Religion* (Jerusalem: 1968), 270-71.

²⁰SDB, 600.

²¹SDB, 600, 608.

²²Frederic Denison, *Westerly and Its Witnesses* (Providence, Rhode Island: J.A. and R.A. Reid, 1878), 59-60.

²³SDB, 601.

²⁴SDB, 600.

²⁵SDB, 606, 608.