**Governor Samuel Ward and his Confession of Faith**

**Posted on Sep 20, 1995 by**[**Jim Franks**](https://www.ucg.org/user/jim-franks)***Estimated reading time: 8 minutes***

While searching through records of early Rhode Island Sabbatarians, I came across a document that piqued my interest. It was dated August 6, 1769, and it was signed in an unusual manner-"Sam: Ward." It was addressed to the "Sabbatarian Church of Christ in Westerly & Hopkinton." The volume that contains this document refers to it as a "confession of faith." I decided to read further in this book, which bore the title Sam: Ward, Founding Father.

For the Sabbatarians, this period of their history was remarkable. The Revolutionary War was on the horizon, but the church was reaching its zenith in attendance and influence. Who was this Sam Ward? What was this confession of faith all about? Samuel Ward’s story provides us with an important insight into the lives and doctrines of the Rhode Island Sabbatarians.

Samuel Ward was born in Newport, Rhode Island, May 27, 1725. He was the second son of Governor Richard Ward and a descendant of Roger Williams. Richard Ward and his wife, Mary, were both members of the Sabbatarian Church in Rhode Island.

On their grave a large flat stone honors them. Carved into the stone is a testimony of their lives stating that both were members of the Sabbatarian Church. To have included this on their grave is proof that their religious beliefs were a major part of their lives. These were the parents who gave Sam his start in life.

Samuel Ward rose to prominence in this tiny New England colony in the middle of the 18th century. He served in virtually every major office of the colony, being elected governor in May 1762. In 1765 he was reelected governor and, upon the passage of the infamous Stamp Act (a tax levied on the colonies by the British Parliament), he immediately made his opposition known. The governors of all the colonies except one took an oath to sustain and enforce this law. The one abstention was Governor Samuel Ward, who alone among his peers stood in opposition to the king of England. He refused to swear allegiance to the king or to enforce the Stamp Act.

**Elected to Continental Congress**

Through a system of town meetings in the fall of 1773, which Samuel Ward was instrumental in organizing, the colony of Rhode Island united in its opposition to England and its oppressive laws. As a result of these assemblies, on May 17, 1774, at a town meeting in Providence, a general congress of all the colonies was first proposed. On June 15, during a session of the General Assembly, Samuel Ward and Stephen Hopkins were elected the first delegates from any colony to the Continental Congress, which subsequently met in Philadelphia. Governor Ward was to serve as a delegate to the Continental Congress until his death in 1776.

Samuel Ward was also selected to chair many of the meetings of the Continental Congress. His name appears on many of the official documents from that time. He was the man who nominated George Washington to be the general of the Revolutionary Army. Governor Ward also stood alone at first in recommending that the colonies build a navy. Eventually he garnered enough support to have 13 ships built. He was the chairman when the “Resolution of Secrecy” was adopted in the spring of 1776.

His activities, however, took a great toll on his health and well-being. In October 1775, Samuel Ward wrote the following to his family back in Rhode Island:

“I am almost worn out with attention to business. I am upon a standing committee of claims, which meets every morning before Congress, and upon the secret committee which meets almost every afternoon; and these, with close attendance upon Congress, and writing many letters, make my duty very hard, and I cannot get time to ride or take other exercise. But I hope the business will not be so pressing very long” (Charles Denison and John Ward, *The Life of Gov. Samuel Ward* , Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society, 1907).

Samuel Ward’s signature is affixed to the “Resolution of Secrecy” which preceded the Declaration of Independence. Here we also find the unusual signature Sam: Ward, along with those of Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, Samuel Adams, John Adams and others.

The story of Samuel Ward’s death provides a further glimpse into the unusual dedication of this man. According to Kenneth Smith in his book Sam: Ward, Founding Father (*Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society* , 1967):

“… While the Continental Congress was in session an epidemic of smallpox broke out in Philadelphia and many of the delegates to the Congress were inoculated. This was in the early days of inoculation when it meant that you had to be deathly ill for two weeks and hope that you would live. It was still the best way to avoid the smallpox, but it meant you had to resign yourself to sickness for some time.

“The other delegate from Rhode Island, Mr. Hopkins, decided to be inoculated. Ward decided that since his colleague was to be out of action he had to push through his efforts to secure a navy. So week after week he continued to postpone his inoculation, always convinced that he had so much else to do that he couldn’t do this. And on the 15th day of March in 1776 the chairman was taken ill while he was presiding over the Continental Congress. And on the 25th of March, ten days later, Governor Ward died of smallpox at the age of 51.”

The untimely death of Samuel Ward was a shock to the delegates. The congressmen passed a resolution that said all the delegates would attend the funeral. The sermon was delivered by the Sabbatarian minister. Governor Ward was a beloved and dedicated patriot of that time and a Sabbatarian. Among the papers he left behind was a letter containing his confession of faith (reproduced below).

**Anti-Trinitarian document**

This document is remarkable. Some claim it reflected a standard formula that was used by the people of that day. Whatever it may be, a personal reflection of belief or recitation of a formula, it is significant because of its anti-Trinitarian stance. This was unusual since there were many people of that day who had embraced the idea of the Trinity. This confession of faith helps illustrate the doctrinal position of these early Sabbatarians.

We find further explanation of this in Henry Clarke’s 1811 book about the history of the Sabbatarians. Clarke was a personal friend of the Ward family and pastor of a Sabbatarian group in New York state. Notice what he says about the doctrinal beliefs of these people:

“I conclude that all believe in one God, the Father and Maker of all things, sin excepted, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, or that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and also in the Holy Ghost, as the operative power or spirit of God. But there are few if any, of this denomination, as I conceive, who believe that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, are three absolute distinct persons, coequal, coessential, and coeternal Gods, and yet but one God; as such an idea would be in the face of scripture, and repugnant to right reason” (Henry Clarke, *A History of the Sabbatarians or Seventh Day Baptists in America* , Seward & Williams, 1811).

The Sabbatarians had a strong history of rejecting the Trinity doctrine. When we analyze history, we see that certain beliefs resurface over time and must be readdressed. The doctrine of the Trinity appears to be one of those. In reading the history of people such as Samuel Ward, it is enlightening to glimpse into the doctrinal beliefs of those who lived more than 200 years ago.

The story of the Sabbatarians in New England during the colonial period is both fascinating and reassuring. They were people of strong belief and character. I see many similarities in our day.

Samuel Ward is but one of many during this period who was willing to state his strong belief in God’s Sabbath and rejection of other ideas such as the Trinity. I have grown to respect them for their courage and to appreciate their willingness to take a stand on matters that were controversial even in their day. We would all do well to emulate the strengths and convictions of these rather extraordinary people.

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To the Sabbatarian Church of Christ in Westerly & Hopkinton:

Being fully satisfied that Baptism is a Christian Duty I desire to be admitted to that Ordinance this Day: my Life and Conversation are well known; my religious Sentiments are That there is one God the Father of whom are all Things and one Lord Jesus Christ by whom are all Things, That the Universe thus created has been preserved and governed by infinite Wisdom, Power and Goodness from the Beginning, That mankind having fallen into the most gross & unnatural Idolatry, Superstition and Wickedness it pleased God for their Recovery to make a Revelation of his mind & will in the holy Scriptures which (excepting the ceremonial Law and some part of the Judicial Law peculiar to the Jews) it is the Duty of all mankind to whom they are made known sincerely to believe and obey: my Sins I sincerely & heartily repent of and firmly rely upon the unbounded Goodness and Mercy of God in his only begotten Son Christ Jesus for Pardon & eternal Life: and I sincerely desire and Resolve by his Grace for the future to walk in all the Commandments and Ordinances of the Lord.

Sam: Ward August 5, 1769  
(Samuel Ward’s confession of faith - from Sam: Ward, Founding Father)

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