**From Sunday to Sabbath: The Puritan Origins of Modern Seventh-Day Sabbatarianism, by Ralph Orr**

Sabbatarianism is usually defined as the belief that Christians should observe a particular day of the week as the Sabbath, either the seventh day or the first day of the week. This means more than simply attending church on the weekend. On their Sabbath, Sabbatarians refrain from all customary work, except works of charity, necessity and worship, because they understand the Sabbath to be a law of God. They do so even if it means economic hardship, shunning or persecution.

Church historians generally believe that modern Sabbatarianism, as strict Sunday observance, first flourished among the Puritans. Less understood is the Puritan origin of *seventh-day*Sabbatarianism. This article traces both the historical development of the Puritan doctrine and its fathering of modern *seventh-day*Christianity.

**Is Sabbatarianism irrelevant?**

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While most modern Christians might believe this subject irrelevant to present-day circumstances, concerned observers have thought otherwise. In 1991 Seventh-day Adventist scholar Samuele Bacchiocchi commented:

The survival of both Judaism and Christianity as dynamic religions may well depend on the survival of the observance of their respective “Sabbaths.” In Western European nations, where only 10 percent or less of the Christian population attends church services on the day traditionally regarded as the “Lord’s day,” the survival of Christianity is threatened. Social analysts already speak of the “post-Christian” era in Western Europe. (In Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington and William H. Shea, editors, *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions* [New York: Crossroad, 1991], 69)

**American Sabbatarianism**

Living in this “post-Christian” world, it is hard to imagine how influential Sabbatarianism once was.

[Robert Baird] wrote in 1855 that there was no subject on which American Christians were more happily united than that of the proper observance of the Sabbath [i.e., Sunday]. He found that every state in the Union had made laws in favor of proper observance of the Lord’s Day, because the whole economy proceeded on the principle that America was a Christian country and because the courts had pronounced Christianity to be “part and parcel of the laws of the Land.” He said that he uttered the language of every American Christian when he said: “Woe to America when it ceases to be a Sabbath respecting land.” (George M. Stephenson, *The Puritan Heritage* [New York: MacMillan Co., 1952], 181)

Although Christians practiced Sabbatarianism throughout pre-Civil War America, New England Christianity exemplified this tradition more than any other region.

The New England Sabbath always began at sunset on Saturday night and ended at the next sunset…. [Activities] prohibited on Saturday evening… were allowed on Sunday evening. (Ibid., 181-2)

All the New England clergymen were rigid in the prolonged observance of Sunday. From sunset on Saturday until Sunday night they would not shave, have rooms swept, nor beds made, have food prepared, nor cooking utensils and table-ware washed. As soon as their Sabbath began they gathered their families and servants around them…and read the Bible and exhorted and prayed and recited the catechism until nine o’clock, usually by the light of one small “dip candle” only…. Sweet to the Pilgrims and to their descendants was the hush of  their calm Saturday night, and their still, tranquil Sabbath, — sign and token to them, not only of the weekly rest ordained in the creation, but of the eternal rest to come. (Alice Morse Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*[New York: Scribner, 1909], 254, 257)

Contrast the Puritan past with modern Christianity’s near-total disregard of the Sabbath. A Christian today who observes any day as a Sabbath is increasingly rare.

How was it that this doctrine, now nearly forgotten, once so permeated American church life and thought?1 The answer lies in the religious principles of many who founded the United States and established its religious institutions. Those founders predominantly came from the more Bible-centric elements of English Christianity, the Separatist and Puritan branches of English Protestantism.

**Puritanism**

Puritanism arose within the Anglican church among those dissatisfied with the pace of church reforms. When Henry VIII separated the English church from Rome, the primary question was, Who was the earthly head of the English church, the king or the pope? Many other doctrines and forms of Catholicism remained. Yet Anglicanism quickly came under pressure from other Protestants wishing to further transform the English church. Simultaneously, those loyal to Rome struggled to return England to the Catholic fold.

When the Catholic Mary Tudor became queen, many Protestant teachers fled to Europe to escape martyrdom. In places such as Geneva and Zurich, they studied the Calvinists’ Reformed theologies, and they witnessed firsthand an apparently successful attempt to transform whole cities to Calvinistic norms.

Calvinists saw the Old Testament law as pointing sinners to their need for Christ. Once converted, the law also guided Christians in holy living. Furthermore, it assured those living by the law, particularly the Ten Commandments, that they had received God’s grace. To put it in other words, “The law became increasingly important to prepare for grace, as a guide for grace, and to achieve assurance of grace.”2

When Elizabeth I became queen, English Protestant leaders returned to England, bringing with them these Calvinistic views. They expected that God would further reform the English church along Calvinistic lines.

In schools such as Cambridge, the works of European Reformed theologians became a normal part of a theological education. Calvinism increasingly inspired many Christians who wished to return the church to first-century standards. People holding such views were eventually called Puritans, though a strict delineation between Anglicans and Puritans is not always possible.

**Church government**

Among the suggested reforms was the reorganization of the Anglican church government. The Anglican church had maintained the structure of Catholicism’s hierarchical government, only with the king instead of the pope as its head and bishops ruling under him. Many reformers preferred congregationalism, which emphasized local-church autonomy and congregational self-rule, or presbyterianism, which combined elements of both systems by giving more authority to the pastors. Of the two systems, presbyterianism was the more popular. Those favoring presbyterianism also tended to support Sunday Sabbatarianism.

**Political overtones**

Presbyterianism, by its nature, challenged the existing church/state relationship. Because of this, Sabbatarianism, with which it was associated, had political overtones. Puritans insisted on the Protestant standard of *sola scriptura,* while Queen Elizabeth and the church hierarchy gave equal (if not greater) weight to church tradition. Therefore, one could not take a stand on Scripture’s place in faith without simultaneously taking a political stand.

These two perspectives were heading for a clash. While the Puritans considered themselves loyal subjects seeking reform, the establishment came to consider them seditious, for they challenged the authority of both church and state. This helps to explain some of the severe reactions that later developed against Puritan Sabbatarianism.

**Sermons and salvation**

Puritan views on the Sabbath were partly shaped by their understanding of the role sermons played in salvation. As John Primus observed, Puritans believed sermons to be the primary means by which God extends his grace to man.3They probably came to this conclusion based on their understanding of [Romans 10:14](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Rom%2010.14): “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (KJV). Because of this, they agreed with the general Protestant view that the sermon should be the focus of Sunday services. Consequently, Puritans were concerned about the conditions under which sermons were delivered.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, large segments of the English people ignored worship services. Contemporary reports complain how those who did attend would come and go as they pleased, interrupting the service as they did so. Entertainments, such as the blood sport of bearbaiting, athletic competitions, dancing, gambling, church-ales and fairs were more widely attended than worship services. Often, those who did attend services could not wait for them to be over so they could participate in some form of secular entertainment. This is not surprising, since the English working person labored long hours for six days each week, with little chance for diversion. Sunday was their only time off.

Many church leaders, not just Puritans, expressed concern for the general disregard of Sunday sanctity. Kenneth Parker has amply shown in his exhaustive work *The English Sabbath*that English Christians had long supported the custom of Sunday services by appealing to the Fourth Commandment.4 On this basis Parker argues that Sabbatarianism did not originate with Puritans, but had been a well-established belief in the English church. Parker’s critics claim he failed to appreciate that in the late 1500s the predominant Anglican argument for a Sunday Sabbath (or at least a semi-Sabbath) lay in church tradition and authority, not in biblical law. The
establishment felt the law had no bearing on the subject because the Sabbath had been abolished.

On the other hand, the Puritan doctrine of a Sunday Sabbath appealed primarily to biblical law. While Anglican leaders came to insist that church and state were the final authorities in regulating Sunday activities, Puritans denied them any such authority. True Sabbatarianism, whether advocating Sunday or Saturday, insists both on the divine origin and the continued authority of the commandment. Sabbatarianism is not simply a devout respect for a church tradition. We should ignore a tradition, Sabbatarians believe, if God’s law demands it.

**John Hooper**

The first Reformed Englishman to espouse Sabbatarianism was John Hooper, called the author of English Sabbatarianism.5 His *Declaration of the Ten Holy Commandments,* published in 1548, was widely known and used. In this book, Hooper taught that God authored the Sabbath from
creation and that God, by raising Christ from the dead on the first day of the week, changed the Sabbath to Sunday. “This Sunday that we observe is not the commandment of men,” he claimed.6 So popular were his views that Hooper’s book went through several printings over the next four decades.

By 1570, people living in the English countryside widely held to Sabbatarianism. Richard Fletcher, future bishop of London, complained in 1573 that it

is said credibly in the country that…it is no greater a sin to steal a horse on Monday then to sell him in fair on the Sunday; that it is as ill to play at games as shooting, bowling on Sunday as to lie with your neighbor’s wife on Monday. (David S. Katz, *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England*[New York: E.J. Brill, 1988], 5)

An increasing number of tracts during that decade spread those views.

**The Dedham conferences**

Because of such propaganda, many laypersons became more concerned about how to obey the Fourth Commandment. This is evident in the surviving notes of the Dedham conferences. Pastors from the area of Dedham, a village 70 miles northeast of London, organized the conferences in 1582. They had decided to meet regularly to discuss the practical problems faced by the people of their parishes. Their approach showed an increasing presbyterian sentiment among the clergy.

**The Paris Garden incident**

Over the next several years the Sabbath occupied a significant amount of the conversations at the Dedham meetings. All participating pastors agreed that Christians should mark Sunday with a certain amount of solemnity. They differed over whether Sunday was a Sabbath by divine law or church tradition.

By this time, popular preaching often treated Sunday tragedies as God’s judgment on sin, the most famous incident of which occurred at London’s Paris Garden.

John Stockwood [had] predicted in his 1578 sermon at St Paul’s Cross that God’s judgement would fall on Sabbath-breakers and singled out Paris Garden, a venue for blood sports, as an example of these abuses. (Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath*[New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 86)

Five years later on Sunday, January 13, 1583, a crowd gathered for a bearbaiting. During the height of combat between the bear and the dogs, the upper gallery collapsed. Seven died and many more were injured. Never mind that the collapse may have been caused by overcrowding and rotten timber. “The immediate effect of the Paris Garden incident was a national clamor for the better observance of the Lord’s Day.”7 The clamor soon led to the first of a series of Sabbatarian bills debated in Parliament over the next few decades. Though the first failed, another was introduced. Despite the growing sentiment for Sabbath reform, Elizabeth vetoed the legislation when it reached her the following year.

**Nicholas Bounde’s *The Doctrine of the Sabbath***

Though many clerics in the established church sympathized with the Sabbatarian position, some felt threatened by its insistence on the Ten Commandments, not church tradition, as its foundation. With the publication in 1595 of Nicholas Bounde’s *The Doctrine of the Sabbath,* the establishment felt compelled to respond more vigorously.8

Bounde’s book contained nothing fundamentally new. It reflected a developing Sabbatarian theology preached at the university at Cambridge.9However, *The Doctrine of the Sabbath*treated the subject more extensively than its published predecessors, and its tone was more dogmatic and contentious.

Bounde strongly affirmed that the Sabbath is rooted in God’s law, not church tradition. More significantly, he was the first Puritan to deny emphatically any ceremonial aspect of the Fourth Commandment.

This last point is critical in the development of the doctrine. Up to this point, Puritan Sabbatarians argued a dual nature of the Fourth Commandment. That is, they believed the Sabbath commandment as found in the Old Testament was both moral and ceremonial. The need for a specific day of rest and worship, they affirmed, was moral and dated from creation. The setting aside of the *seventh*day of the week they viewed as ceremonial. Bounde, on the other hand, denied there was anything ceremonial in the command.

[Bounde began] the argument by observing that, certainly for the Old Testament Israelites, the Sabbath had to be on the seventh day “and upon none other.” In fact, he argues the absoluteness of the seventh day Sabbath so strenuously, that one wonders how he is going to make the shift to the first. It takes fifteen pages of intricate argument. (John H. Primus, *Holy Time: Moderate Puritanism and the Sabbath* [Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1989], 76)

Bounde was also “the first [Puritan] to affirm explicitly a twenty-four-hour Sabbath.”10While Bounde made the transition from the seventh day to a Sunday Sabbath, one wonders if everyone who accepted the basis of his Sabbatarianism made that same transition.

Bounde’s views were popular. In 1606 he published a revised edition titled *Sabbathum Veteris et Novi Testamenti, or The True Doctrine of the Sabbath,* noted for its extensive quotations from Jerome Zanchius, a highly respected theologian from Heidelberg who wrote extensively on the subject.

While Bounde was Calvinistic and quoted from Calvin’s sermons, when it came to the Sabbath, he preferred to quote Zanchius. For those familiar with Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* the reasons are obvious. For although Calvin preferred a solemn respect for Sunday tradition, and he taught that the Ten Commandments provided a guide for Christian living, he believed that God abolished the Sabbath at Christ’s death. Because of this, anti-Sabbatarian literature often made extensive use of Calvin.

**The establishment responds**

The establishment’s vehement response to Bounde may have begun with a sermon preached by Thomas Rogers on Monday, December 10, 1599.

He declared that it was “anti-christian and unsound” to teach that Christians are bound to keep the Sabbath day. He associated this with Jewish ceremonies…. Asserting that no day was established by scripture, he claimed that the Lord’s Day was enjoined by civil and ecclesiastical constitutions and could be called the Queen’s Day instead of the Lord’s Day, Sabbath or Sunday…. Anyone who objected to his teaching he branded as “sabbatarians and dominicans,” and insinuated that their Sabbatarianism grew out of papistry. (Parker, 96-7)

For many years, Rogers led the charge against Sabbatarians. Parker in *The English Sabbath*suggests Rogers was motivated more by political ambitions than religious concerns: that he saw in the Sabbatarian controversy an opportunity to advance himself politically. Perhaps, but it may also be that he expressed his sincerely held religious sentiments after becoming increasingly concerned about the political ramifications of Puritanism.

**“Sabbatary Christians”**

In 1607, following the second edition of Bounde’s book, John Sprint published a less polemic Sabbatarian work titled *Propositions Tending to Prove the Necessary Uses of the Christian Sabbath.* It is beyond the purpose of this article to detail Sprint’s position, but one thing is of particular interest. In recounting the different views about the Sabbath, Sprint mentioned the existence of

“Sabbatary Christians” who claimed that the seventh day Sabbath of the Jews was established from creation and remained as binding on Christians as Jews, because of the perpetuity of the law. (Parker, 97, 162 n2)

Sprint clearly distinguished these seventh-day Christians from the more commonly recognized Sunday Sabbatarians. Yet he did not say if he had a specific English group in mind.

**Anabaptist influence?**

An Anabaptist seventh-day Sabbatarian sect in the German states was once widely known,  though never large.11 Officially expelled from the Holy Roman Empire in the 1590s,12 the last known reference to the sect dates from 1600.13

Robert Cox claimed in his *Literature of the Sabbath Question* that the Sabbatarian Anabaptists founded the English sect of Seventh Day Baptists.14 Such a claim has an appeal to seventh-day Christians, since it appears to push their verifiable history further back. That is important for those who believe their church organizationally and/or physically descends from the first-century church.

Yet Cox and others have produced no proof confirming any link between English Sabbatarianism and Sabbatarian Anabaptism. In part, the confusion arose because opponents of the earliest English Baptist churches sometimes labeled Baptists as Anabaptists, and thereby erroneously linked the two. Today, Seventh Day Baptist, Baptist and Anabaptist historians, having examined the extensive church records available from the period, reject any claim suggesting that the Baptist churches, including seventh-day Baptists, grew out of the Anabaptist
movement. This is especially so in the case of the seventh-day churches.15

Therefore, another source for seventh-day Sabbatarianism must be found. The most likely source remaining is the Puritan movement. Sprint’s mention of “Sabbatary Christians” raises the possibility that Sunday-sabbatarian agitation had by 1607 reached its logical climax — the acceptance of the seventh-day Sabbath by a small number of English Christians.

**Elizabethan seventh-day observers?**

Some 19th and early 20th-century Sabbatarian histories, based on a comment in the 1881 edition of *Chamber’s Encyclopædia,* claimed that English seventh-day observance began earlier than the Sprint quote indicates. In the article “Sabbath,” an anonymous author stated:

*In the reign of Elizabeth, it occurred to many conscientious and independent thinkers (as it had previously done to some Protestants in Bohemia), that the Fourth Commandment required of them the observance, not of the first, but of the specified seventh day of the week, and a strict bodily rest as a service then due to God…. The former class became numerous enough to make a considerable figure for more than a century in England under the title of “Sabbatarians” — a word now exchanged for the less ambiguous appellation of “Seventh-day Baptists.” (Chamber’s Encyclopædia, vol. VIII [London: W. and R. Chambers, 1881], 402)*

The author did not name any of these alleged Elizabethan seventh-day observers and provided no proof to support his claims. The article’s conclusions may have depended on Cox’s previously published book or on assumptions about Sprint’s 1607 comment. Later editions of the encyclopedia deleted these claims.

The first verifiable record of English Reformation seventh-day Christians is Sprint’s 1607 comment. Their mention follows decades of Sunday Sabbatarian agitation. It is reasonable to believe that English seventh-day Sabbatarianism arose from Puritan Sunday Sabbatarianism — the one naturally and historically following the other. We shall return to seventh-day Sabbatarianism later.

**Virginia’s death penalty**

Not long after Sprint’s book appeared, Puritan Sabbatarianism spread to the New World. When Lord De La Warr became governor of Virginia in 1610, he established strict Sabbatarianism in the colony.

All were required to attend divine service, preaching, and catechizing on Sunday, and were forbidden to “violate or break the Sabbath by any gaming, public or private abroad or at home.” Transgressors suffered the loss of provisions for a whole week. Second offenders lost their allowance and were whipped. Death was the penalty for third time offenders. (Parker, 115)

Though the death penalty was never used, the law illustrates how seriously Virginia’s early colonial administration regarded the Sabbath. Forced two decades later by Charles I to lessen these penalties, Virginia never became identified with Sabbatarianism the way Puritan New England would.

We will return to New England shortly, but before we do, we need to review the stories of John Traske and the *Book of Sports.*

***The Book of Sports***

When James I ascended the English throne, everyone concerned about the proper observance of Sunday thought they had a king who would restore some respect for church practice. James gave every indication that he was concerned about the need to reform the English people’s Sunday habits. Thus, in 1603 and 1604, he decreed reforms to restrict some forms of Sunday entertainments.

The Puritans were heartened. Yet the Puritans would eventually learn that his views were more in line with the established church’s position than with theirs, for he appealed to church and state tradition rather than Scripture.

In August 1617, as James traveled through Lancashire, a group of workers petitioned him. They complained that the local authorities had denied them their lawful participation in Sunday recreations. In their defense, James issued his “Declaration of Lawful Sports.” Dancing, archery, athletic events and Whitsun-ales were not to be prohibited after the time of church services. Note that the king did not encourage these activities at just any time on Sunday. He permitted them only after church services. He believed that everyone should be in church on Sunday. But he felt would be unnecessary and harmful to require more than this.

The following year, in 1618, he issued the same decree for the entire nation in his *Book of Sports.* In essence, James repudiated strict Sunday observance for a more recreation-oriented day. His view was the law of the land.

The Puritans were dismayed. They complained that the *Book of Sports*abrogated the progress made with James’ previous decrees, and they felt he had usurped authority reserved for local magistrates. To the Puritans, the nation had taken a dangerous step backward into immorality and a harmful expansion of royal authority.

**John Traske**

Perhaps a significant factor in James’ reversal was the preaching of John Traske. Though Traske lacked a university education, the Anglican bishop James Mountagu ordained him in September 1611. Traske gained notoriety as a traveling preacher who held to extreme Sunday Sabbatarianism. He had disciples throughout the country, including London. In 1615 the authorities arrested “him for going up and down as a wandering minister.”16

Hamlet Jackson, one of Traske’s disciples, through his study of Scripture, became concerned that they were observing the wrong day. While traveling on a Saturday, Jackson was struck by a blinding light, an event he felt confirmed his views. Jackson then convinced Traske and his followers to begin to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. Traske probably contributed to his persecution by insisting on Sunday work, the observance of other Jewish festivals17and by practicing the dietary restrictions of Leviticus.18

Traske was arrested in early 1618. The authorities charged him with making “the people of God, his majesty’s subjects, little better than Jews” because he taught people to observe the Sabbath.19 He was whipped on his way to a pillory, to which he was nailed by an ear. While so restrained, he was branded with an I, for Jew.20

From there he was whipped on his way to another pillory, where his other ear was nailed. The court ordered him to pay the impossible fine of 1,000 pounds and then to be imprisoned for the rest of his life.21 In prison he recanted, wrote a refutation of his beliefs and was released.

The severity of his punishment suggests the degree to which his views appeared to threaten the established order. Perhaps James also used him to express his displeasure toward the Puritan Sunday Sabbatarians. He could not treat the Puritans that way, as they were too popular, but by abusing Traske he may have hoped to intimidate the Puritans, too.

Other members of Traske’s congregation were imprisoned, and two of them died in prison. Returne Hebdon died in 1625, becoming the first English seventh-day martyr. Traske’s wife, Dorothy, proved more enduring than he had. She died after living her last 25 years in prison, never wavering from her seventh-day belief. During that whole time, she refused the Levitically prohibited foods offered her, surviving instead on bread, water, herbs and roots. Late in life, the state moved her to a better prison, where she tried some clean meats and wine. Some ascribe her death to her change in diet.22

For some reason the authorities released Hamlet Jackson without his recanting. He and several others went to Amsterdam, and there are no further surviving records.23

**The Baptist Henry Jessey**

Traske eventually became a member of what has become known as the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church (a Sunday-observing group whose name, given it by historians, comes from its series of pastors). This group was originally a congregational fellowship until its third pastor, Henry Jessey, became a Baptist. (Jessey has been described as “the most influential founder of the English Baptists.”24) Before his death, Jessey became a seventh-day Baptist, though he usually kept his opinions to himself. He continued to preach on Sunday, while gathering a small group of seventh-day observers around him on Saturday.25

There is no evidence that Traske directly influenced Jessey to observe the seventh day. Traske died in 1636, well before Jessey joined the congregation. And Jessey apparently did not accept the seventh-day Sabbath until well after he joined the congregation.26 While the influence may not be direct, I cannot imagine members of a congregation not discussing why one of their members had a branded forehead. Even after his death, the story of the branded man probably would have been told more than once. The Sabbath had to come up in such discussions.

The order of events was as follows: Traske preached the seventh-day Sabbath and was arrested. Traske recanted. Traske ended up in the Jacob-Lathrop church. Traske died. Henry Jessey joined the congregation and became its pastor. Jessey accepted adult baptism. The congregation became Baptist. Jessey accepted the seventh-day Sabbath and thereby the seventh-day Sabbath entered the most influential of the earliest English Baptist churches.

So although Traske did not proselyte for the seventh-day Sabbath while in the congregation,
his presence may have motivated others to investigate the question. One should not discount his influence, even posthumously.

But I am getting ahead of the story, for the conversion of Jessey to the seventh day did not take place until the early 1650s. In any case, it was not long after Traske’s arrest and punishment in 1618 that James issued his *Book of Sports.*

The 1620s saw growing stress between King James and the Anglican hierarchy on the one hand,
and an increasingly presbyterian-minded Parliament on the other. Where local magistrates could impose Sabbatarianism, they did. Attempts to impose the looser standards of *The Book of Sports*usually failed.

**Theophilus Brabourne**

As the 1620s came to a close, Theophilus Brabourne wrote and published *A Discourse on the Sabbath Day.* He followed this in 1632 with *A Defense of the Most Ancient and Sacred Ordinance of God’s, The Sabbath Day.* This second book got him imprisoned. Both books advocated the seventh day.

Brabourne was an unusual seventh-day advocate. To his death he remained a loyal member of the Church of England. His books were written in a vain attempt to reform the church he chose to remain within. Brabourne himself never kept the seventh-day Sabbath. He argued that until the church reformed, he was not bound to do what he believed to be God’s will. His opinions received wide enough attention to move the authorities to silence him. Yet his example of not living by his convictions probably did little to advance his cause. Nevertheless, his
writings kept the idea of the seventh-day Sabbath before the public.27

When Charles I became king, he tried to crush Puritanism. Throughout the 1630s he tried to rule England without Parliament. To strengthen his rule over the church, he appointed in 1636 the staunchly anti-Puritan William Laud as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

**Heylyn’s misrepresentations**

This is the decade in which Peter Heylyn published his influential *History of the Sabbath.* In that book, Heylyn argued that Sunday Sabbatarianism was a Puritan innovation. Heylyn misrepresented Sabbatarianism’s history when he ignored the older voices in the English church that had long held similar views. Yet as Kenneth Parker pointed out in his book *The English Sabbath,* church historians have echoed Heylyn’s erroneous view for several centuries. Puritans, in promoting a Sunday Sabbath, revived a long-held English belief instead of originating one.

William Laud was instrumental in the 1633 reissuance of *The Book of Sports.* If he thought it would be more warmly received than before, he was sorely mistaken. Opposition was vocal and strong. Consequently, the government suppressed Sabbatarian books of all stripes. The anti-Puritan party appeared in control. However, events would eventually lead to a resurrection of presbyterian fortunes.

**Civil war and the Westminster Confession**

A Scottish rebellion forced Charles I to recall Parliament, since he could not raise taxes without Parliament. This time the presbyterians were firmly in control of Parliament. Sunday Sabbatarianism became a test of one’s political correctness. Thus began a civil war that pitched the Puritan Parliament’s supporters against the king and his Anglican supporters.

In 1646, in the midst of the civil war, presbyterians gathered at Westminster Abbey to shape a doctrinal confession. This confession later became the standard of faith for most Presbyterians around the world. About the Sabbath it declares:

As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord’s day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts, about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy. (John H. Leith, editor, *Creeds of the Churches* [Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1982], 218)

In later centuries, Presbyterians spread Sunday Sabbatarianism worldwide. In their fellowship, the word *Sabbath*became synonymous with Sunday, not Saturday.

**Seventh-day observance rare**

Seventh-day observance during the 1630s and ’40s, where it was alive at all, existed underground or in prison. According to some accounts, Dorothy Traske died about 1644. Oscar Burdick has discovered a handful of other seventh-day observers during these two decades.

In 1636 John Ley reported in his *Sunday a Sabbath* that a Margaret Former had begun to observe Saturday. About 1641, John Taylor wrote in *A Swarm of Sectaries* that the non-Conformist widow Constable of Brentford had become “a Jew.” Since no practicing Jews lived in England at the time, perhaps Taylor meant she had started to keep the Sabbath. In 1644, Thomas Adams, who was English but living in Amsterdam, was excommunicated from his church for observing the seventh day. There is also the report made by Thomas Edwards in
Gangraena for July 1645 that many people, including some magistrates, in an unnamed town had openly stated their intention to start keeping the “Jewish Sabbath.” The next year Edwards also reported that the preacher Philip Tandy also held to the Jewish Sabbath.28

**Baptist gains**

During the civil war, the army that fought in the name of the presbyterian-controlled Parliament became dominated by more independently minded Christians, including many Baptists. When the rebels executed Charles I and established Oliver Cromwell’s Commonwealth, Baptists found themselves free to promote their faith.

Though Cromwell was of Puritan persuasion and would have preferred ruling with a tight hand, the post-civil-war Parliament restricted his powers. Among its more important laws was one granting liberty in Christian worship, with the limitation that it “not be extended to Popery and Prelacy, nor such as, under the profession of Christ, hold forth and practice blasphemy and licentiousness” (Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists*[Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 55).

Because of this freedom, the decade of the 1650s became a time of Baptist expansion. It also was the decade in which Sunday Sabbatarianism gained a centuries-long foothold in English culture and law. Yet, after becoming culturally established and socially acceptable, Sabbatarians lost much of their zeal. The Sabbatarian war had been won.

Seventh-day Sabbatarianism never became established. Though supposedly protected by the newly legalized religious freedom, old social prejudices remained. The English still looked on Jews with suspicion and bigotry, even though under Cromwell Jews eventually could legally return to England for the first time in centuries.29

**The first Sabbath-keeping Baptist congregations**

Because of these prejudices and the recent history of anti-seventh day persecution, those holding seventh-day views tested the waters carefully. On at least one occasion, church records were kept in code, while seventh-day publications were released anonymously or with only the author’s initials. Therefore, one cannot speak with absolute certainty as to the exact year the earliest seventh-day congregations originated. Based on their own writings and other evidence, it appears that most of them arose during the decade of the 1650s.

In every case, those individuals whose backgrounds historians have uncovered lived first as Baptists before becoming seventh-day Sabbatarians. This may explain why seventh-day Christians felt an affinity for Baptists. They viewed Sunday-observing Baptists as their spiritual siblings, accepting their conversions and often worshiping with them.

It is not clear how many congregations the seventh-day observers established during the 1650s. By the 1660s we know of at least 10, but some scholars believe the evidence suggests that the movement was more widespread than that number indicates. Because of the distribution of seventh-day literature, isolated individuals or small, weak, pastorless groups may have been present in many locales.

**The execution of John James**

The overthrow of the Commonwealth and the restoration of the monarchy in late 1660 placed nonconformists in more difficult circumstances. Charles II, suspected of being a secret Catholic, sought the overthrow of all nonconformist privileges and freedoms. His plan was inadvertently aided by a Fifth-Monarchist revolt in January 1661.

Fifth Monarchists were a diverse group of Christians who looked for the soon-coming kingdom of God on earth (the fifth monarchy of Daniel 2). The more radical Fifth Monarchists sought to set up Christ’s rule through violence. After their London revolt was crushed, intolerance ruled England.

As under James I, Charles II found a seventh-day Sabbatarian a convenient target for his wrath. The pastor of London’s seventh-day Mill Yard congregation was John James, a poor silk weaver by trade. A Fifth Monarchist, though not a revolutionary, his favorite scripture was [Revelation 11:15](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Rev%2011.15), “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever” (KJV). His martyrdom is one of the most thoroughly documented of that decade.

On the Sabbath of October 19, 1661, while preaching before his flock, the king’s officers dragged him from his pulpit. They accused him of treason, not of being a Jew or keeping the Sabbath. This was a political trial, though it had clear religious overtones.

No credible evidence was submitted to substantiate the charges against him. Witnesses against him contradicted each other. Brave souls testified for him that they had heard the witnesses talk among themselves of how the state had bribed or threatened them into testifying. Others stepped forward on his behalf, denying he ever spoke treason. Still, he was found guilty. His sentence read:

John James, thou art to be carried from hence to the prison, and from thence to the place of execution and there to be hanged by the neck, and being yet alive, thy bowels to be taken out (a fire having been prepared before hand) and to be burned before thy face. Thy head to be severed from thy body and thy body quartered, thy head and body to be disposed according to the king’s pleasure. (W.E. Mellone, “Seventh-Day Christians,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* [1898], 404-29)

The king’s pleasure was to have James’ head placed on a stake outside the congregation’s meeting hall.

In speaking of his beliefs, he acknowledged that he was a baptized believer who accepted the principles in [Hebrews 6:1-2](https://biblia.com/bible/niv/Heb%206.1-2) and such doctrines as faith in God, repentance from dead works, baptism, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment, ending with the affirmation that he owned the Commandments of God, the Ten Commandments as expressed in Exodus 20, and did not dare willingly to break the least of those to save his life. He also declared, “I do own the Lord’s holy Sabbath, the seventh day of the week to be the Lord’s Sabbath.” (Sanford, 69)

Before being executed, James stated he was prepared to die, denied the charges and asked for God’s mercy on the executioner. The hangman, who had not received the expected bribes to reduce James’ agonies, had promised to multiply James’ torments. So moved was the hangman by John James’ speech that he mercifully waited until James died before drawing and quartering him.

**The Great Expulsion**

In 1662 Parliament passed the Fourth Act of Conformity. Its framers designed the law to expel all nonconforming pastors from Anglican pulpits by requiring all ministers to agree to the *Prayer Book* of 1662. It worked. One fifth of the English clergy, 2,000 ministers, refused to sign. The state kicked them out of their pulpits in what has become known as the Great Expulsion. Two years later, in 1664, Parliament passed the Conventicle Act, which forbade nonconformists from holding religious meetings of more than five persons not living in the same household. This increasingly ugly picture was probably the main reason many nonconformists, such as Stephen Mumford and his wife, sailed for Rhode Island and other American colonies.

**The Mumfords**

The Mumfords were seventh-day Baptists. In the past much has been written about them that is not true — that Stephen Mumford was a minister, that he was a missionary sent by the London seventh-day Baptists, that he was a member of a London seventh-day church. Mumford sailed from London in 1664, but he was not a member of any London church. Nor was he ever ordained. He and his wife probably sailed to Rhode Island simply to have a better, freer life.

Stephen Mumford and his wife had been members of the Tewkesbury Baptist congregation (later called the Natton Baptist church). In 1986 Oscar Burdick discovered that the coded record book of this church had been deposited in the Gloucestershire County Record Office. Among the members listed in code were the Mumfords. Tewkesbury was a mixed Baptist congregation, containing recent converts to the seventh-day as well as Sunday observers.30

The Mumfords came to Newport, Rhode Island, in large part for the religious freedom available to them there. Baptists were welcome in Rhode Island when other colonies persecuted them. Finding no other seventh-day observers with whom they could worship, the Mumfords did as they had done in England — they worshiped with Sunday-observing Baptists, believers whom the Mumfords considered to be of the same basic Christian faith. It was not long before other Baptists in Newport converted to seventh-day Sabbatarianism.

Others have told the story of how these events led in 1672 to the founding of the first seventh-day congregation in the Americas. Although the seventh-day Baptist faith nearly vanished from the British Isles by 1800, it flourished in the colonies. (The Seventh Day Baptist Church organized its General Conference in the early 1800s). In large part this can be explained by the enduring respect throughout Puritan New England for the Ten Commandments.

**The 20th century**

American Sunday-Sabbatarianism exercised considerable influence well into the 20th century. Yet as the United States has become less Protestant and therefore less Puritan in its heritage, laws that restricted Sunday commerce and activities have been gradually overturned or ignored. Even in religiously conservative sections of the country, few Christians seem bothered by attending Sunday morning services and a football game in the afternoon.

Yet ironically, the number of seventh-day observers continues to grow (though they probably are not as strictly observant as their spiritual ancestors were). In the United States, the Seventh Day Baptists have suffered numeric setbacks from the time of their greatest strength in the mid-1800s, but this does not tell the whole story. Through their missions, more Seventh Day Baptists now exist outside the United States than in it.

During their time of strength, Seventh Day Baptists contributed to the founding of several universities, though these universities are no longer under denominational control. Their greatest legacy is the influence they had on spreading seventh-day Sabbatarianism within the early Adventist movement. Both the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Church of God (Seventh Day) owe a significant part of their Sabbath understanding to Seventh Day Baptist influences. From these newer seventh-day churches have arisen dozens of other seventh-day sects and denominations.31

There are Sunday-observing groups that have grown more rapidly than seventh-day fellowships, but they have tended to move away from the Puritan view of the Sabbath. It is only among the seventh-day churches that this legacy is growing.

**Endnotes**

1 One should not assume that because Puritans dominated the New England governments, at least in the settled areas, that average New Englanders practiced Sabbatarianism. They probably did so only as the government forced it on them. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have demonstrated that the traditional view of a pious New England is not true.

There never were all that many Puritans, even in New England, and non-Puritan behavior abounded. From 1761 through 1800 a third (33.7 percent) of all first births in New England occurred after less than nine months of marriage…despite harsh laws against fornication. Granted, some of these early births were simply premature and do not necessarily show that premarital intercourse had occurred, but offsetting this is the likelihood that not all women who engaged in premarital intercourse would have become pregnant. In any case, single women in New England during the colonial period were more likely to be sexually active than
to belong to a church — in 1776 only about one out of five New Englanders had a religious affiliation. (Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776-1990*[New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993], 22)

2 John H. Primus, *Holy Time: Moderate Puritanism and the Sabbath*(Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1989), 117

3 Primus, 161.

4 Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath*(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

5 Primus, 18.

6 Primus, 20.

7 James T. Dennison, Jr., The Market Day of the Soul: The Puritan Doctrine of the Sabbath in England, 1532-1700 (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 28.

8 Bounde is sometimes spelled Bownde.

9 Primus, 57-73.

10 Primus, 78.

11 Daniel Liechty, *Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists*(Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1988).

12 Claus-Peter Clasen, “Anabaptist Sects in the Sixteenth Century,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* vol. 46 (July 1972), 256-79.

13 *Mennonite Encyclopedia,*396.

14 Robert Cox, *Literature of the Sabbath Question*(London: F.S.A. Scot, 1865), 158. Some confusion arises as the spelling of the names of different seventh-day churches. The Seventh Day Baptists and the Church of God (Seventh Day) do not hyphenate their name, unlike the Seventh-day Adventists.

15 There is an early link between the first English Baptist church and some Anabaptists, but not in the direction that some had formerly claimed. Instead of Anabaptists becoming Baptists, we find that a few Baptists became members of the Anabaptist sect of Mennonites.

The first English Baptist church arose in Amsterdam from among the Separatists and centered about John Smyth…a graduate of Cambridge. It held what are usually termed Arminian views [emphasizing man’s free will as opposed to the strict predestination views of the Calvinists] and was the spiritual ancestor of the General Baptists of Britain. Some of Smyth’s followers united with the Mennonites. Thomas Helwys, one of Smyth’s intimates who later broke with him but remained “Arminian,” founded (1612) what seems to have been the first Baptist church on English soil, outside the walls of London, and took pains to disassociate himself from the Mennonites. A few years later, in the next reign [that of Charles I], what were known as Particular Baptists arose, so designated because they held to a restricted or particular atonement which was only for the elect. They began as a secession from the (Congregational) Separatists. (Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity; Volume II: ad 1500-ad 1975*[New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975], 818)

The earliest seventh-day Baptist church records show that the vast majority of their number identified with the Particular Baptist movement.

16 Parker, 163.

17 One of the jailers during Traske’s Sabbatarian imprisonment claimed that he overheard Traske argue with others over whether they should eat a lamb and unleavened bread at the time of the Passover. Another account by John Falconer, a Roman controversialist, perhaps based on the same testimony, claimed that Traske read Eusebius’ Church History and concluded from early church custom that Christians should observe “the Jewish date for Easter” as well as observe the Days of Unleavened Bread. Of course Christians can observe “the Jewish date for Easter” without any recourse to a lamb. For Falconer’s account see B.R. White, “John Traske (1586-1636) and London Puritanism,” *Congregational Historical Society Transactions,* vol. xx (1965-1970), 223-33.

18 Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists*(Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 50-1. Traske refused the Levitically unclean foods prior to keeping the seventh-day Sabbath (White, 225).

19 *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America,*vol. 1 (Plainfield, New Jersey: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1910), 108. Care should be taken before using this older work, as more recent scholarship has corrected a number of errors. The research of Oscar Burdick and Don Sanford’s *A Choosing People*provides a healthy corrective of earlier histories.

20 At that time the English alphabet did not contain the letter J, so Jew was spelled Iew.

21 Henry E.I. Phillips, “An Early Stuart Judaizing Sect,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society  of England,*vol xv, 66. Before using this source as authoritative, I would recommend confirming its conclusions from other sources first. For example, he alleges that Traske and Jackson disagreed on the day of worship; that it was Jackson alone who advocated the seventh-day Sabbath. Actually, Jackson came to this position first and then persuaded Traske.

22 White, 229.

23 It has been claimed that Hamlet Jackson and his followers converted to Judaism while in Amsterdam. This is possible, though attempts to identify the time and place of this conversion have been disputed (Cecil Roth, “The Middle Period of Anglo-Jewish History [1290-1655] Reconsidered,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England,*1955, 9, n. 5. Also see White, 228). We know that as late as 1680, English seventh-day churches corresponded with their counterparts in Holland (*Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America,*vol. 1, 65). However, we do not know the history of the Dutch seventh-day observers. Were they descendants of Jackson’s flock? Or were they more recent immigrants to that country, perhaps refugees from the persecutions under Charles II? I suspect the latter to be more probable.

24 Katz, 21.

25 Oscar Burdick, “Act I: The Great Decade, 1650-60,” an unpublished manuscript, 4-5.

26 Burdick to Ralph Orr, 29 November 1988.

27 Sanford, 51-3.

28 Burdick, “Seventh Day Baptist Origins in England, 1650-1683: A Bibliography” (Berkeley, California: Graduate Theological Union Library, 1984), an unpublished manuscript, 6.

29 “The English Jews were only in the spring of 1656 making their first tentative excursions into English life as they left their self-imposed Spanish and Portuguese Roman Catholic disguises” (Katz, 156).

30 Burdick, “From Whence Did Stephen Mumford Come?” a draft of an item for the 1987 Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society report, a copy of which was sent by him to me.

**List of 17th-Century English Seventh-Day Churches With Their Earliest Known Dates**

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| --- | --- |
| “Sabbatary Christians,” site unknown | 1607 |
| Traskites, London | 1617 |
| Burton-on-Trent, Derbyshire | 1650 |
| Leominster, Herefordshire | 1650 |
| Dorchester, Dorsetshire | 1652 |
| Henry Jessey’s group, London | 1653 |
| Mill Yard, London | 1653 |
| Colchester, Essex | pre-1657 |
| Tewkesbury [Natton], Glouchestershire | circa 1660 |
| Bell Lane, London | 1662 |
| Chertsey, Surrey | pre-1668 |
| Wallingford, Berkshire | 1668 |
| Northwalsham, Norfolk | pre-1669 |
| Watleton, Oxfordshire | pre-1669 |
| Worborough, Oxfordshire | pre-1669 |
| Pinners Hall, London | 1676 |
| Gloucestershire\* | 1680 |
| Hampshire | 1680 |
| Sherbourne, Dorsetshire | 1680 |
| Belmister, Dorsetshire | pre-1690 |
| Bledlow, Buckinghamshire | pre-1690 |
| Boston, Lincolnshire | pre-1690 |
| Dorsetor, Dorsetshire | pre-1690 |
| Harwich, Essex | pre-1690 |
| Ingham, Norfolk | pre-1690 |
| Melton, Suffolk | pre-1690 |
| Nottingham, Lincolnshire | pre-1690 |
| Salisbury, Wiltshire | pre-1690 |
| Sherbon, Dorsetshire | pre-1690 |
| Sturmister, Dorsetshire | pre-1690 |
| Woodbridge, Suffolk | pre-1690 |
| Yarmouth, Norfolk | pre-1690 |

\* This list is based primarily on information found in *The Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America,* volumes 1 and 2, and Ernest A. Payne’s “More About the Sabbatarian Baptists,” *The Baptist Quarterly* (London), vol. 14, no. 4, October 1951. Additional information is supplied by Oscar Burdick, “SDB Churches,” an unpublished manuscript.\*\* Is this the same, or the remnant of the Natton congregation, which started around 1660, or is it a separate congregation? Payne’s list includes two seventh-day churches in this shire in December 1690.

*Last modified: Tuesday, January 15, 2019, 5:21 PM*

<https://www.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=4282>

NB: one specialist on the Seventh Day Baptist wrote (11 March):

>At a quick look it seems to be a valid outline of history supported by evidence; whatever occurred in previous eras 'Puritanism' rediscovered the Sabbath and then some people realised that the Sabbath was Saturday. Sabbatarian Baptists were all Baptists first. Traske didn't seem to be connected with later Sabbatarians. He's correctly referred to what we know about the Anabaptists on the issue. He's included relevant references.<