ORIGINS OF THE MARITIME BAPTISTS:
A NEW DOCUMENT

The early history of the Baptist denomination in Maritime Canada has been shrouded in a good deal of mystery and uncertainty, chiefly for the period before the revivals of Henry Alline which began in 1776. The major difficulty is the absence of contemporary eye-witness evidence, so that historians are forced to place entirely too much reliance on second-hand information, particularly family tradition and reminiscences of early settlers collected much later than the events that they recall. Such memories may be roughly accurate, but not necessarily very precise.

Some contemporary evidence does exist for the early Baptist Church at Sackville (now in New Brunswick). The New England Baptist historian, Isaac Backus, for example, was personally acquainted with the Round brothers (Richard and Nathaniel), leaders of those Baptists from Rehoboth who settled Sackville in 1763 and returned to Massachusetts in 1771, and his account of the Sackville Church is based on eye-witness information. No such evidence exists for the other early Baptist church in the Maritimes, which was organized at Horton by Ebenezer Moulton. After canvassing Nova Scotia in the early nineteenth century, the Baptist historian David Benedict wrote of this church that “no details of its early operations appear in any documents I have received.” Without citing sources, most historians have agreed (probably by copying from one another) that Moulton arrived in Horton in 1763, baptized some people, and organized an ephemeral church on the open or mixed-communion principle. This church collapsed soon after Moulton departed from Horton, and its existence was so brief and inconsequential that the Horton Baptist Church—organized in 1778 in the wake of the Henry Alline revivals—is considered to be a new church, by implication without relation to the earlier Moulton church.

Actually, some contemporary participant evidence for the early Horton church does exist, in the form of a letter from three members of the church (Peter Bishop, John Turner, and Daniel Harris) to Elder John Davis of Boston, dated October 27, 1771, and now located in the manuscript collection...
of the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio. The history of the letter is an interesting one. Davis was one of the leaders of the New England Baptists, and he apparently had some money which he was to distribute to destitute churches, and which led him to inquire of conditions in Nova Scotia. He was also planning to write a history of the denomination, which probably accounts for the initial preservation of the letter from Nova Scotia. On the death of Davis in 1772, his manuscripts passed to Isaac Backus, and the outer page of the original letter has a filing notation in Backus' hand. The bulk of the material collected by Backus was preserved by the Backus Historical Society and was ultimately deposited in the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts. All later Baptist historians used the Backus manuscripts, and apparently William Cathcart, the compiler of The Baptist Encyclopaedia, took some with him and deposited them in Cleveland. Thus do important original sources get buried in unexpected places.

How does the letter alter our picture of the early history of Maritime Baptists? While it does not create any need for drastic revision of existing interpretations, it does correct some dates, clarify other points, and raise some tantalizing new questions which it does not answer.

The letter is quite clear, for example, that Ebenezer Moulton was in Horton from 1765 to 1767. It is also clear that a church was organized by “Solemn Covenant” at some time during Moulton's stay, although the writers do not give an exact date for this. Evident also is the fact that the “Baptist [sic] Church of Christ in Horton in Kings County” survived the departure of Moulton. He was succeeded by Joseph Reed of Sackville, who was elder of the church until his death in 1770. (According to A. W. H. Eaton, who had no precise dates for Reed, he died from “the lodging of an apple core in his throat”.) As late as 1771, the Horton church was still hopeful of obtaining a pastor in the person of one “Mr. Hewet”. As late as 1771, the Horton church was still hopeful of obtaining a pastor in the person of one “Mr. Hewet”.

Several interesting questions are raised though not solved by the letter. For one thing, the Horton Baptist Church was obviously still in existence in late 1771, although some care must be taken here in ascribing too much life to it, since the writers were looking for financial assistance and may have been anxious to appear more a going concern than was actually the case. Not only was the church something more than an ephemeral creation of the 1760s, but one of its members—Peter Bishop—was also a founder of the Horton Baptist Church in 1778. This is a continuity which was not previously realized. It is entirely possible that the Horton Baptist Church never really dissolved, and
was only reconstituted or reconstituted in 1778 when Nicholas Pierson was
ordained as pastor.\textsuperscript{11} If the Sackville Church is entitled to date its founding
from 1763 (despite a ten-year period without formal organization from 1771 to
1781), then the Horton Church certainly can legitimately date itself from 1765
to 1766.\textsuperscript{12} It must be admitted that Horton might prefer to keep the present
1778 date and its incontestable claim of being the oldest Baptist Church in
continuous existence in Canada. The present evidence does not permit us
to push continuous existence for Horton back before 1778, although it strongly
suggests this possibility.

Another interesting although inconclusive point is the reference in the
letter to Baptists in Newport under the pastoral care of Elder Shubael Dimock.
Both family and Baptist tradition has always maintained that Dimock did not
become a Baptist until very late in his life, and most historians suggest that he
did not minister to a flock at Newport on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{13} Edward Manning
of Cornwallis insisted that Dimock served as a ruling elder (a lay position)
rather than pastor at Newport.\textsuperscript{14} The Horton letter is not technically in­
sistent with this position, but it nevertheless suggests by the phrase “under
the Pastoral Care” that Dimock was more than simply a lay reader. The
Horton Baptists obviously had some contact with their Newport brethren,
unlike those on the western shore of Nova Scotia which they admitted were
“some Distance from us,” and therefore their evidence must be given some
credence.

Although the letter increases immeasurably our documentable know­
edge of the Baptists in early Nova Scotia, its principal contribution is to whet
our desire for further clarifications. The complete text of the letter follows:

\begin{center}
Horton 27th of October 1771
The Baptis Church of Christ in Horton to Elder John Davis of Boston
Send Greeting—
Dear and Rev't Sir—Having the favur of your Letter to Mr. Brown Concerning
the Baptis Churches in Nova Scotia being Imbodied so as to make a Regular
application for a Proportion or Dividend of the income of the Money raised by Mr
More for the support of Disenting Ministers or [of?] the Gospel among such
Churches—We take the freedom to Trouble you with a few lines on that Occa­
sion. And thank you for the Kind & Solitious Care you Manifest toward us in
being Desirious to know our Church, State, and Circumstances, in order that we
may Receive the Monies Procured for the purpose aforesaid—And it is our Heart
Desire and earnest Prayer to our Heavenly Father, that you may reap the
fruits of the Christianlike Disposition which we trust is the Motive that leads you out
thus to wish the well-being of Christ's feeble Flock and Churches in this Infant Colony—

And as you thus Require to know the state of the Baptist Churches here we shall Indeavour to Inform you as well as we are able—And first Concerning our Selves—Altho' some of us were members of an Imbodied Church in New England yet we were several years in these parts without the Dispensation of the Gospell among us, until Divine Providence order'd that Elder Moulton should visit us in the year 1765 who tarried with us for some time; Dureing which time it pleased the Lord to visit this Land in a very Wonderfull and Powerfull Manner Convinying and Converting many souls as we trust and Believe to the true Faith in Jesus Christ; After which & During the stay of the said Moulton with us, we thought it our Duty to Join our selves in Solemn Covenant. And accordingly those who were not Baptized in New England were here Baptized and did sign Covenant together—Hencwe Call our Selves the Baptist Church of Christ in Horton in Kings County—Some time the latter part of the year 1767 it Pleased the Lord to Remove from us the said Elder Moulton and we were for a short time Distitute of an under Sheaperd—Soon after which it was the Divine Pleasure to favour us with a Visitation of Elder Joseph Reed from Comberland, who administered the Gospell with us untill Death Removed him from this Life in October 1770. Sence which time we have Continued assembling ourselves together and Indeavour through Divine assistance to keep the Worship of God according to the best Gifts Bestow'd on us—But at Present we have no Minister among us—Therefore we should be glad if you know of any Man that is not Ingaged who has the Qualifications of a Gospell Minister according to our Profession, that you would Communicate our case and Necessity unto him and ingage him to come amongst us—Mr. Brown Informs us of one Mr Hewet—who he said had Determined to come down to Nova Scotia but we have had no further News Concerning him—If he should come among us you will Proverbly have knowledge of it—There is also a Baptist Church in the Town of Sacville in Comberland County under the Care of Elder Nathanel Round, who have ben Regularly Imbodied for this Several years past—

There is also a Considerable Number of Baptist in the Town of Newport in this County, under the Pastoral Care of Elder Shubael Dimmock—As to the Baptist Churches at Cape Persue yarmoth &c Mr. Moulton can better Inform you as you have also Wrote to him, & as they are some Distance from us—

Thus we have Indeavoured to give you a brief and true Account of the Baptist Churches in these parts so far as we have had knowledge (tho more Particularly of our own). And Beg your Prayers and the Prayers of all Gods People that the Lord may be with us & build us up in his most Holy Faith, & that the Everlasting Gospell of the Lord Jesus Christ may flourish in this
Remote part, where Antichrist once Reigned, To which end we Desire to Subscribe our Selves, in Behalf of the Church.

Your very affectionate and Sincere
Christian Friends, and Humble Serv'ts
Peter Bishop
John Turner Members of the Church
Daniel Harris

NOTES


5. Edward Manning wrote that “Elder Molton was [in Horton] and laboured successfully among the People. And Baptized upwards of 20 Persons. And formed a church upon the open communion Plan in 1766 which afterwards entirely dissolved.” Manning Miscellaneous papers, Maritime Baptist Historical Collection.

6. See the statement by Manning in note 5. Although several histories mention
the Moulton church, no one has suggested that the present Wolfville Baptist Church antedates 1778.

7. I am grateful to Professor William G. McLoughlin of Brown University for calling this letter to my attention. All three of its authors were original grantees (Eaton, *Kings County*, 71-73), Bishop and Turner getting full shares of 500 acres and Harris a half-share, and all three appeared on the Horton census taken in 1770.

8. Nothing more is known of this fund. Davis (1737-1772) was a graduate of Brown University and was pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Boston from 1770 to 1772.

9. Eaton, *Kings County*, p. 306. Nothing more is known of Reed. He is not to be confused with the Solomon Reed, pastor at Middleborough, Massachusetts, who came to Nova Scotia in 1772 to ordain Jonathan Scott at Yarmouth (*Armstrong, The Great Awakening*, p. 41).

10. It has been impossible to identify the “Hewet”, or probably Hewitt, mentioned here.

11. *Armstrong, The Great Awakening*, 68-69. It was clear in 1778 that there was an insufficient number “to act as a Church, to choose and ordain officers”, and five more had to be baptized before officers could be elected. Horton and Cornwallis Church Records, 1778-1816 (copy), Maritime Baptist Historical Collection, 1-5. But this does not preclude a reconstitution.

12. The founding date for the Sackville church has been a great bone of contention among Baptist historians, with E. M. Saunders leading those who insisted that continuous life (as in Horton/Wolfville since 1778) is more important than early founding dates of defunct churches (as in Sackville) in dating Churches.


14. Manning Miscellaneous Papers, Maritime Baptist Historical Collection.