

J. M. Bumsted

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.¹ 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.² No such evidence exists for the other early Baptist church in the Maritimes, which was organized at Horton by Ebenezer Moulton.³ 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."⁴ 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-communication principle.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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".)⁹ As late as 1771, the Horton church was still hopeful of obtaining a pastor in the person of one "Mr. Hewet".¹⁰

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 recovenanted in 1778 when Nicholas Pierson was ordained as pastor.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 1766.¹² 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.¹³ Edward Manning of Cornwallis insisted that Dimock served as a ruling elder (a lay position) rather than pastor at Newport.¹⁴ The Horton letter is not technically inconsistent 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 knowledge 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:

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 Occasion. And thank you for the Kind & Solitious Care you Menifest toward us in being Desirous 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 welbeing of Christ's feeble Flock and Churches in this Infant Colony—

And as you thus Require to know the state of the Baptis Chhes 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 Convincing 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—Hence we Call our Selves the Baptis 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 asembling 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 Quallifications of a Gospell Minister according to our Profession, that you would Communicate our case and Necessity unto him and ingage him to come amongs 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 Baptis 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 Baptis 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 Baptis Churches in these parts so far as we have had knoledge (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 flowrish 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

1. The principal accounts are: Charles Tupper, "History of the Baptist Churches in Nova Scotia", *The Baptist Missionary Magazine, of Nova Scotia & New Brunswick*, I (1829), 287-288, 315-319, 346-352, 376; David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denominations in America* (New York, 1848), 521-532; J. M. Cramp ("Menno"), *The Baptists of Nova Scotia (1760-1860)*, a scrapbook of letters originally in the *Christian Messenger*, 1860-1863, Maritime Baptist Historical Society, Acadia University Library, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 1-10; I. E. Bill, *Fifty Years with the Baptist Ministers and Churches of the Maritime Provinces of Canada* (Saint John, 1880), 27-35; E. M. Saunders, *History of the Baptists of the Maritime Provinces* (Halifax, 1902), 62-68; A. W. H. Eaton, *History of Kings County, Nova Scotia: Heart of the Acadian Land* (Salem, Mass., 1910), 303-321; G. E. Levy, *The Baptists of the Maritime Provinces, 1753-1946* (Saint John, 1946), 12-15; M. W. Armstrong, *The Great Awakening in Nova Scotia, 1776-1809* (Hartford, 1948), 34-60. Most of the information on the early history comes from material which Edward Manning, Baptist pastor at Cornwallis from 1795 to 1851, supplied to David Benedict.
2. Isaac Backus, *A History of New England, with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists* (2nd edition, with notes by David Weston, Newton, Mass., 1871), II, 436-437. See also W. H. Warren, *Sackville Baptist Church: A Historical Sketch* (n.p., n.d.), which argues for a 1763 founding date for the church despite its disappearance from 1771 to 1781.
3. For a sketch of Moulton (1709-1783), see M. W. Armstrong, "'Elder Moulton' and the Nova Scotia Baptists," *Dalhousie Review*, XXIV (1944), 320-323.
4. Benedict, *General History*, p. 525.
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 intirely 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.
13. For sketches of Dimock (1708-1781) see Joseph Dimock, "Shubael Dimock", *The Baptist Missionary Magazine*, III (1836), 171-177, and John V. Duncanson, *Falmouth: A New England Township in Nova Scotia* (Windsor, Ontario, 1965), p. 241. See also Benedict, *General History*, 522; Bill, *History of the Baptists*, 29, 178; and Cramp, *Baptists of Nova Scotia*, 3-4.
14. Manning Miscellaneous Papers, Maritime Baptist Historical Collection.