



## A Genealogist's Guide to Seventh Day Baptists

by Shellee A. Morehead, PhD

**D**O YOU HAVE ANCESTORS FROM SALEM, WEST Virginia? What about Janesville, Wisconsin; Denver, Colorado; Piscataway, New Jersey; Berlin or Alfred, New York; or Woodbridgetown, Pennsylvania? These disparate places were all home to migrant groups of Sabbatarians, or Seventh Day Baptists (hereafter SDB), many of whom can be traced back to Rhode Island families of the late seventeenth century. This article will briefly summarize the history of Seventh Day Baptists in the United States, explain how they differed from other religious groups, and describe the relevant genealogical records.

### Roots of Sabbatarianism

Sabbatarianism began in England during the first half of the seventeenth century, a time of great political and social upheaval. Many groups left England, either by force or by choice, to escape persecution and pursue their religious beliefs according to their own conscience.

In New England, the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colonies, founded by such early emigrant groups, were established primarily for members to practice their religious beliefs free from persecution and without government interference. However, the leaders of those colonies were not tolerant of others whose beliefs and practices did not conform to their own. Those

who practiced or preached alternate doctrines were not welcome in those communities, and were often arrested for not adhering to Puritan standards.

Baptists differed from Puritans — and other religious groups — on the practice of infant baptism.

Baptists believed only adults could truly understand and make pledges regarding their faith and, therefore, only adults should be baptized. This difference in theology was one reason why Baptists were persecuted.

The Baptist concept of a “covenant church” allowed each individual to follow his own conscience regarding his beliefs, rather than accept the beliefs and actions propounded by a ruling government and church hierarchy. This was another significant bone of contention with the Puritans. In Massachusetts, the Puritan government controlled religious life. Baptist churches, usually consisting of a pastor, elders, perhaps some deacons, and members, did not conform to the more hierarchical Puritan model, and — especially in the early years of the movement — had no overarching structure.

Dissidents from Massachusetts established themselves in Rhode Island — in Providence, Portsmouth, and Newport, three early towns settled on lands purchased from the Narragansetts. Throughout the 1640s and 1650s, Rhode Island’s religious tolerance enticed even more groups to settle there. The First Baptist Church

*Above: Image by Lloyd Manuel. Courtesy of Newport Historical Society, 2009.3.99. Manuel likely used an earlier drawing as a model for his artwork.*

**LIST OF SURNAMES FOR EARLY CHURCH MEMBERS WITH THE LOCATIONS OF CHURCHES**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Date of SDB church founding</b>	<b>Common surnames of early church members</b>
Newport and Westerly, R.I.	1671	Burdick, Clarke, Crandall, Hubbard, Maxson, Mosher, Stillman, Wells
Newtown and Pennepek, Pa.	1700	Davis, Evans
Hopkinton, R.I.	1708	Babcock, Burdick, Clarke, Crandall, Maxson, Stillman
Piscataway, N.J.	1705	Bonham, Dunham
Ephrata, Pa.	1728	Beissel, Noble, Koster, Kimmel and Miller
Shiloh, N.J.	1737	Ayars, Cole, David, Dunham, Dunn, Greenlee, Jarman, Kelley, Lewis Many went to Wisconsin
Shrewsbury, N.J.	1745	Babcock, Brand, Crandal, Clayton, David, Lipincot, Maxson, Patterson, Randolph, Stillman, Thorp
Berlin, Rensselaer Co., N.Y.	1780	From Hopkinton Went to Wisconsin
Woodbridgetown, Fayette Co., Pa.	1789	From Piscataway
Salem, W.V.	1789	Babcock, Bond, Clayton, Crandall, Davis, Lippincott, Maxson, Patterson, Randolph, Van Horn
Niles, Independence Valley, Wellesville, and Genesee in Allegany Co., N.Y.	1824	Ayars, Babcock, Backus, Beebe, Burdick, Clarke, Crandall, Cook, Coon, Davis, Dunham, Green, Gruman, Kenyon, Langworthy, Lanphear, Livermore, Merrit, Perry, Potter, Randolf, Stannard, Smalley, Snyder Stillman, Taner, Wigden, Yapp
Alfred, Alleghany Co, N.Y.	1835	From Berlin, N.Y., and Rhode Island Babcock, Bliven, Burdick, Coon, Green, Lanphear, Maxson, Saunders
Hornellsville, Hartsville Hill, Steuben Co., N.Y.	1847	Burdick, Clark, Crandall, Cornwell, Hood, Maxson, Palmiter, Phelps, Potter, Roan, Satterlee, Stillman, Truman, Wilbur, Williams, Witter, Woodward
Milton, Rock County, Wisc.	1829–1840	From Berlin, N.Y., and Piscataway, N.J., Crandall, Inman, Holmes, Goodrich

*Compiled from sources including Ilou Sanford's Membership Records of Seventh Day Baptists Churches in Western New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania 1800–1900 and Don Sanford's A Free People in Search of a Free Land.*

in Newport was established about 1644 and led by John Clarke following his move from Massachusetts. He obtained the Rhode Island colonial charter from England in 1663 — the first colonial charter providing for a formal separation of church and state and three branches of government. The first Sabbatarian church in what is now the United States was an offshoot of this church in Newport.

The Sabbatarians grew out of the Baptist movement; like the Baptists, the SDB practiced adult baptism and baptism by immersion. The SDB also followed the belief in covenants among members of a congregation, with little hierarchical structure in individual congregations or the SDB church as a whole. Each individual

church was independent, but the vast correspondence exchanged among the churches shows a wide network of connections and support across a vast area.

How do Sabbatarians differ from other Baptists? The main difference concerns the definition of “Sabbath” and whether it is the last or the first day of the week. The SDB observed the Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day. Most Christian groups, however, celebrate their Sabbath on Sunday, the first day of the week. There was a general stigma associated with Christians celebrating on Saturday, which is also the Jewish Sabbath. In many places the SDB were punished for not refraining from work and other activities on Sunday.

## Beginnings of Sabbatarianism in Rhode Island

When Stephen Mumford arrived in Newport from England in 1664, he was already a firm believer in Seventh Day principles, having likely been associated with Bell Lane Seventh Day Baptist Church in London.<sup>[1]</sup> He began preaching in John Clarke's Baptist church in Newport, and eventually convinced several members of that congregation to become Seventh Day Baptists. A lively correspondence between the Seventh Day groups in England and New England has been preserved; letters written by Samuel Hubbard of Newport are among the earliest historical documents of the Sabbatarian practice in America.

The first group in New England to celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday, rather than the traditional Sunday, formed in Newport in December 1671. Several men and women, including William Hiscox, Stephen Mumford, and Samuel Hubbard, signed a covenant agreeing to Seventh Day principles, such as keeping the Sabbath holy, celebrating on Saturdays, and baptizing adults. These early Sabbatarians maintained close ties with Newport's First Baptist Church throughout this early period, and their members often worshipped on both Saturday and Sunday. From this small beginning, the Seventh Day Baptist Church grew.

The first offshoot of the Newport SDB church took root in Rhode Island's southwestern corner — Westerly, settled in 1665. Shortly thereafter, a congregation formed and met regularly on Saturday.<sup>[2]</sup> Westerly was incorporated in 1669; several of its first freemen were Seventh Day Baptists. By 1678, small SDB groups in Newport, Westerly, and Hopkinton in Rhode Island, and New London in Connecticut, were considered to be one church with several meetings. Most meetings grew over time and eventually separated to form their own churches.

The Newport and Westerly congregations, although separated geographically by forty miles and a body of water, communicated frequently during the period before their formal separation. Westerly, then on the western frontier, came under attack during King Philip's War in 1675, and many of its settlers moved back to Newport for the duration of the war. The two groups remained a single entity until 1708, when the Westerly group formed the Sabbatarian Church of Westerly.

Sabbatarians made up a large portion of the population in southwestern Rhode Island, and a number of meetinghouses could be found throughout the area. In Westerly, a plaque commemorates the location along the banks of the Pawcatuck River where an estimated 3,000 communicants were baptized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>[3]</sup> Pawcatuck

## Bibliography

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Seventh Day Baptist and the First, Second, and Third Hopkinton SDB churches were offshoots of the Westerly congregation. The First Hopkinton Seventh Day Baptist Church in Ashaway, one of the largest congregations, was the progenitor of many of the later New York churches. In 1816, this Hopkinton church had 947 members, over three hundred of whom had joined during the tenure of Elder Joshua Clarke in the late 1700s.<sup>[4]</sup>

The process of congregations splintering to form new ones in new areas was repeated over the next two centuries — as Sabbatarians, following the frontier, migrated from Rhode Island to New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and beyond.

### Sabbatarians in Pennsylvania

As the SDB church grew in Rhode Island, William Penn established a haven for Quakers in what became Pennsylvania. The first Sabbath-keeping churches — formed by other religious groups that held the Sabbath on Saturday — were established near Philadelphia about 1700. These churches differed from the Seventh Day Baptist churches in New England because a significant number of their members were of non-English origin. In fact, many German and Welsh immigrants were attracted to the SDB because services were often held in their native languages.<sup>[5]</sup> The local SDB congregations were often composed of Quakers who had become Baptists and, later, Sabbath-keepers.

By the early 1700s, SDB congregations in and around Philadelphia included those in Pennepek and Shiloh (also known as Cohansey), Pennsylvania, and Shrewsbury and Piscataway, New Jersey. The Pennepek church was founded primarily by former Quakers. The Shiloh church founders had come from Wales, via Swansea in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Newport in Rhode Island. The Shrewsbury church was founded in part by English immigrants, but also by members of the Westerly SDB congregation from Stonington, Connecticut (just over the colony line). The Piscataway church, which included members from Plymouth Colony, was formed in 1705, when it split from a Baptist church founded in the 1680s.

One unusual Seventh Day Baptist church was formed in Ephrata in Lancaster County in 1728. This group, composed mostly of Germans, was a monastic community. Many in the Ephrata congregation later moved to Virginia and West Virginia.

#### Repositories for SDB Church records

- Newport Historical Society  
82 Touro St., Newport, RI 02840  
[www.newporthistorical.org](http://www.newporthistorical.org)
- Rhode Island Historical Society Library  
Samuel Ward Papers, manuscript materials  
111 Hope St., Providence, RI 02906  
[www.rihs.org/libraryhome.htm](http://www.rihs.org/libraryhome.htm)
- Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society  
P.O. Box 1678, Janesville, WI 53547  
<http://sdbhistory.org>

Many Seventh Day Baptists from the Philadelphia area and New Jersey, primarily from churches founded by Quakers, chose not to fight in the Revolution. The New England members of SDB churches had no such crises of conscience. In fact, Samuel Ward, governor of Rhode Island from 1762 to 1776, was an active SDB member. He was also a representative to the Continental Congress, and an early proponent of building a navy. Many of Westerly's SDB members joined the Continental Army or were active in the state militia.

The 1794 implementation of Pennsylvania's "blue laws" (laws that prohibited working and doing business on Sunday) created an economic burden for the state's Sabbatarians, who were thus unable to work on Saturday or Sunday. The area's SDB members either changed denominations or migrated elsewhere.

### Post-Revolution expansion

The economic and social upheaval that followed the Revolution provided incentive for many people to move west. The expanding frontier pulled members away from the Eastern Seaboard towards better economic opportunities. The churches in Piscataway and Shiloh, N.J., were instrumental in founding communities in Steuben and Allegany counties, New York. Many Shrewsbury, N.J., church members went by wagon train and settled Lost Creek and Salem in Virginia, later West Virginia.<sup>[6]</sup> These new congregations had a significant impact on local politics, business, and religion.

In general, New England migrants followed northern routes into New York and beyond. Members of the Hopkinton, R.I., SDB churches settled in Berlin, N.Y., and part of the Berlin congregation moved to Alfred, N.Y., where Alfred University was founded by Seventh Day Baptists as a theological seminary. Many people followed a migration route from the Erie Canal to the Great Lakes. A great number of SDB from New York settled in Wisconsin, founding the Milton SDB church in Rock County. This church, in turn, was the progenitor of eleven churches throughout the Midwest — in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado. If your ancestors belonged to SDB churches in those states, you can probably follow them back to Wisconsin, New York, and, eventually, New England.

With the growth and spread of SDB across the United States, the churches began to develop more formal communication channels than those historically available through family ties and annual meetings of various congregations. The General Conference, a



meeting of representatives from all SDB churches, began in the early nineteenth century. Associations — smaller regional groups of SDB churches — developed later to allow groups of churches to be represented in the national conference. Records of the General Conferences are unlikely to contain significant genealogical detail unless an ancestor was a delegate or frequently in attendance.

### Types of records available

Since Seventh Day Baptists practice adult baptism, their baptismal records cannot be used as substitute birth records. Most information relevant for family historians will be found, instead, in membership rolls. A typical record book may provide date of migration (letters of dismissal were often provided before a move); date of baptism (when an individual became a member); and date of death. Records may be available even if the church no longer exists. Throughout their history, the SDB churches have been requested to keep papers and records, and many have complied. The Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society Library in Janesville, Wisconsin, has an outstanding collection of materials related to the history, development, and membership of the SDB.

Among the records still in existence are the covenant for the first SDB church in Newport, and member rolls and baptisms dating to 1692. A great number of letters to and from various churches, often called circular letters, also survive, including correspondence dating from the 1660s of Stephen Mumford with congregations in England. Some of the early church records have been abstracted and are available on microfilm through the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. See the Family History Library catalog ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)) for a variety of sources, including genealogies, for Seventh Day Baptist churches and families across the United States.

Another useful source is the *Sabbath Recorder*, a publication of the SDB church. Published for more than 150 years, it contains information on new churches, news of member churches and individuals, and other miscellaneous material — though it may not be



*The Seventh Day Baptist church in Little Prairie (Nady), Arkansas, circa 1910. Courtesy of the Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society Archives, Janesville, Wisconsin.*

easily searchable. The entire collection is available at Alfred University. Other repositories may have partial collections.

The Seventh Day Baptists have a rich and fascinating history — one that can be explored through many available resources. If you think you may have SDB ancestry, follow the history of the church and its migratory movements to gain a new perspective on your ancestors, their beliefs, and their communities. ♦

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Don Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of the Seventh Day Baptists* (1992), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Denison, *Westerly (Rhode Island) and Its Witnesses* (1878), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. William Burdick, *Bi-Centennial Celebration of the First Seventh-Day Baptist Church of Hopkinton* (1908), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Sanford, p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> See Corliss Fitz Randolph, *A History of Seventh Day Baptists in West Virginia* (1905), available online at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org).

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**SHELLEE A. MOREHEAD, PhD** is a genealogy consultant and researcher with twelve years of experience in family history research. The author of scientific and genealogical articles in national and international journals, she also lectures on genealogy and family history.

