

SHUBAL STEARNS
AND
SEPARATE BAPTIST BEGINNINGS
IN NORTH CAROLINA

Presented to
The 1976 N. C. Baptist History Writing Contest
June 1, 1976

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Because of the religious conditions of Piedmont, North Carolina during the mid-eighteenth century, an enthusiastic northern-bred itinerant Baptist convert was able to invade the area with his unique gospel of conviction and conversion and within three years claim over six hundred adherents. Such was the dramatic success of Elder Shubal Stearns.[1]

However, the story does not end there, because the influence of this man and that of his little church, Sandy Creek, and the association that bears its name gave rise to the Baptist movement in the South and is felt even today in areas throughout the world. This is a study of that success story, beginning in 1755 when Shubal Stearns first set foot in Piedmont, North Carolina, and for our purposes ending just after his death in 1771. It will encompass the rise of[2] Separate Baptists in North Carolina with special emphasis on Stearns' work and influence as his church spread its branches or offshoots to Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. It will also seek to evaluate the impact that this man has had on the religious life of America.

By 1755, there were approximately 100,000 inhabitants in North Carolina, at least two-thirds white, with only about 20,000 to 30,000 of these living in the central and western counties.[3] Consequently, there were wide stretches of uninhabited land.[4] Among these first settlers was maintained some degree of worship by the Quakers, Moravians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, although only the first two were adequately supplied with ministers. The Quakers and Moravians were closely organized groups, well satisfied with their own tenets, and neither was interested in missionary enterprises. The theologically conservative Presbyterians and Lutherans, on the other hand, being served only occasionally by their own ministers lacked an opportunity to expand their doctrines. In fact, because of their disorganized and leaderless condition, they themselves were open to missionary influence.[5] Neither was there an outpost of the established Church of England west of Edge-comb County, although some western settlers were its adherents.[6] The central and western

counties of North Carolina, then, were a fertile field for evangelism after 1755, when there commenced a steady stream of new settlers attracted by land grants and the state of religious freedom existing there.^[7] It was into this setting that Shubal Stearns and his small band of co-laborers came and made their permanent home in the year 1755.

Very little is known of Stearns' early life. We are told that he was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 28, 1706 to Shubal and Rebecca Larriford Stearns.^[8] Bred a Presbyterian,^[9] he was converted during the Great Awakening in 1745 under the preaching of George Whitefield.^[10] Stearns immediately began preaching and ministered among the New Lights in Tolland, Connecticut, for six years. In 1751, he was convinced that infant baptism was unscriptural and that only baptism by immersion was Biblical. Therefore, he joined the Separate Baptists who advocated baptism by immersion, and he himself was baptized by Wait Palmer, minister of Stonington.^[11] On March 20 of that same year he was ordained by Palmer and Joshua Morse, minister of New London.^[12]

The Separates had a strong faith in the immediate teachings of the Holy Spirit and that one might be given special instructions as to the "path of duty" by the Spirit. Stearns felt led by such "instructions from heaven" to move westward to start a great and extensive work. Thus, he left his New England home in August, 1754, for the unknown,^[13] believing that he was in God's will.^[14]

His first stop was Opeckon in Berkeley County, Virginia, where he found a Baptist church under the care of Rev. John Garrard.^[15] There he met Daniel Marshall, his future brother-in-law, who had just returned from working with the Indians. Stearns and Marshall with their families settled for awhile at Cacapon in Hampshire County, Virginia.^[16] While there, Stearns wrote a letter dated June 13, 1755, to a friend, Noah Alden, informing him that some of his (Stearns') friends had settled in North Carolina and "that there was no established meeting within a hundred miles of them and that people were so eager to hear, that they often came forty miles each way when they could have an opportunity to hear a sermon."^[17]

Having thus been urged by the lack of ministers in North Carolina and not having met expected success in Virginia, Stearns, along with seven other families, both friends and kin, set out in November, 1755, traveling two

hundred miles to what is now Randolph County, North Carolina, where they set up permanent residence.[18]

Although there were no organized Baptist churches in the Piedmont at this time, Morgan Edwards, a northern Baptist preacher who traveled through the South during 1770-1772, noted the existence of a group of General Baptists in North Carolina as early as 1742 when William Sojourner formed the Kekukee (an earlier spelling is Quehukey) Church in Halifax County.[19] Evidently, he failed to take into account an even earlier established church at Perquimans on the Chowan River established by Elder Paul Palmer in 1727.[20] Therefore, Stearns' company of Baptists was the third settled in North Carolina, but the first west of Halifax. His small company settled in the forks of the Cape Fear River at a place called Sandy Creek, where Deep River and Haw River meet. As soon as the party arrived, they built a little meeting house. In 1762, another structure, thirty feet by twenty-six feet, was erected on the exact spot of the first.[21]

The prior inhabitants of the little Baptist colony, although brought up in a Christian religion, were grossly ignorant of some of its essential principles. Neither did they know anything of the power of the Holy Spirit. It is said that Stearns, as pastor of the new church, brought "strange things" to their ears as he preached the doctrine of new birth, the necessity of conviction and conversion, and the necessity of knowing the time and place of one's conversion experience. These were hard to understand since the colonists had been used to religion consisting of nothing more than practice of outward duties. After understanding, it was wonderful indeed for one to be able to pinpoint the time and place of the experience.[22]

Sandy Creek Church began to grow under Stearns' powerful preaching, as is evidenced by its inclusion by the end of 1755 of forty families, fifteen being baptized and in communion with the church. By 1758, there were 606 in membership.[23] To these were administered communion every other Sunday except occasionally when wine was unavailable.[24]

Morgan Edwards described Stearns as being a little man physically and of "good natural parts and sound judgment." He had little schooling but was well acquainted with books. His voice was musical and strong, and he managed it in such a way as "to make soft impressions on the heart, and fetch tears from the eyes in a mechanical way; and anon, to shake the very nerves

and throw the animal system into tumults and perturbations.” His example was followed by “all” the Separate ministers. Edwards continued that Stearns' character was indisputably good “as a man, a christian and a preacher.” He had penetrating eyes which seemed to have meaning in every glance.^[25] Tiden Lane, who became a minister after his conversion experience and established a church in Tennessee, described Stearns thus:

When the fame of Mr. Stearns' preaching . . . had reached the Atkin, where I lived, I felt a curiosity to go and hear him. Upon my arrival I saw a venerable old man sitting under a peach-tree with a book in his hand and the people gathering about him. He fixed his eyes upon me immediately, which made me feel in such a manners as I never had felt before. I turned to quit the place but could not proceed far. I walked about, sometimes catching his eyes as I walked. My uneasiness increased and became intolerable. I went up to him, thinking yet a salutation and shaking hands would relieve me; but it happened otherwise. I began to think that he had an evil eye and ought to be shunned: but shunning him I could no more effect than a bird can shun the Rattle snake when it fixes his eyes upon it. When he began to preach my perturbations increased so that nature could no longer support them and I sunk to the ground.^[26]

Others who heard Stearns were affected differently; some by tears, trembling, screams, or exclamations of grief or joy.^[27] Many mocked him, but many accepted this gospel he preached. Elnathan Davis, after an encounter with Stearns became a minister himself.

He (Davis) had heard that one John Stward [sic] was to be baptized, such a day, by Mr. Stearns; now this Steward, being a very big man, and Shubal Stearns of small stature, he concluded there would be some diversion if not drowning; therefore he gathered about 8 or 10 of his companions in wickedness and went to the spot, Shubal Stearns came and began to preach; Elnathan went to hear him while his companions stood at a distance.

He was no sooner among the crowd but he perceived some of the people tremble as if in a fit of the ague: he felt and examined them in order to find if it was not a dissimulation: meanwhile one man, leaned on his shoulder, weeping bitterly; Elnathan, perceiving he had wet his

white new coat, pushed him off and ran to his companions who were sitting on a log, at a distance; when he came one said, 'Well, Elnathan, what do you think now of these damned people?' He replied 'There is a trembling and crying spirit among them: but whether it be the spirit of God or the devil I don't know; if it be the devil, the devil go with them; for I will never more venture my self among them.' He stood a while in that resolution; but the enchantment of Stearns' voice drew him to the crowd once more. He had not been long there before the trembling seized him also; he attempted to withdraw; but his strength failing and his understanding confounded, he, with many other, sunk to the ground. When he came to himself he found nothing in him but dread & anxiety, bordering on horror. He continued in this situation some days, and then found relief by faith in Christ. Immediately he began to preach conversion work, raw as he was, and scanty as his knowledge must have been.[28]

Although Stearns' preaching was highly emotional, he laid heavy emphasis on the new birth, free justification, believer's baptism, and the autonomy of the local church, all still basic doctrines among Baptists.[29] He also emphasized the availability of the Holy Spirit for living the Christian life and that by His leadership one could be led to accomplish the two great goals in the Christian's life: glory of God and salvation of men.[30] His church allowed ruling elders, elderesses, and deaconesses and observed baptism, the Lord's Supper, love feasts, laying on of hands, feet-washing, anointing of the sick, right hand of fellowship, kiss of charity, and devoting children.[31] The pastor received no salary except labor provided by the church members and occasional presents amounting to about £20 during the year.[32]

Because of the fervent missionary and evangelistic zeal of Stearns and his fellow worker's, their work was immediately and miraculously successful. Further, the progress of the first ten years of Sandy Creek history is unparalleled in Baptist history.[33] The wide extent of her influence spread from the Potomac to Savannah and beyond so that Separates became a great people and churches were scattered over five hundred miles. "This church in seventeen years had spread her branches southward as far as Georgia; eastward to the sea and Chesapeake bay; and northward, to the waters of the Potomac. It . . . became mother, grand-mother, great-grand-mother to 42 churches from which sprung 125 ministers . . ."[34] "The word went forth

from this sion [sic] and great was the company of them who published it, in so much that her converts were as drops of morning dew.”^[35]

The first branch of Sandy Creek Church was Abbott's Creek about thirty miles away.^[36] Marshall was called as its pastor and after much difficulty was ordained in 1756.^[37] Martha Stearns Marshall, Shubal Stearns' sister, aided her husband and their work so progressed that many were “turned to the Lord.” Although the date is disputed, around 1760, Marshall and a group of members from Abbott's Creek were influential in organizing the first Separate Baptist Church, “the Mother of all Virginia Baptists,” in the state of Virginia.^[38] Later, he moved a group of Abbott's Creek members into the area of Beaver's Creek, South Carolina to establish a church.^[39] His missionary efforts did not stop here, for in 1771, he left his charge at Beaver's Creek and moved further south to Kioke, Georgia.^[40] He established strong and growing churches wherever he went.

The second church to be established from Sandy Creek was southeast at a place called Deep River. Its location is now not known. However, it is known that Stearns took an interest in the church, whose only pastor was Philip Mulky, another Stearns convert. In 1760, this church was broken up when Mulky and part of its members moved to Broad River, South Carolina, and began another church. Mulky remained at Broad River for two years as the church grew to one hundred members. Impelled by the missionary spirit, in December, 1762, he moved one hundred miles away to organize the Fair Forest Church which was destined to become “a mother church with branches widely extended all over that section.”^[41] These churches gave the Catawba Valley and the mountain section of North Carolina their first knowledge of the Baptist message.

Another group of Deep River members began a church in Staunton River, Virginia under the leadership of Joseph and Gillian Murphy, both baptized by Elder Stearns. These brothers constituted other churches not only in North Carolina, but also in South Carolina and Tennessee.^[42] Joseph Murphy was accused of leading in the Regulator movement in 1771, but this is unlikely since he was doing missionary work in Surry County at the time.^[43]

Haw River became another branch of Deep River with Elnathan Davis as its minister. In October, 1765, Stearns held a meeting here, described in the following account from a letter Stearns wrote to friends in Connecticut:

“About seven hundred souls attended the meeting, which held six days, we received twenty-four persons by a satisfactory declaration of grace, and eighteen of them were baptized. The power of the Lord was wonderful.”^[44] Before 1772, Haw River had five branches.^[45]

A third arm of Sandy Creek Church was Grassy Creek in northern Granville County with James Read (sometimes spelled Reed) as its pastor. It had a large and wealthy membership that encouraged the pastor to take missionary tours, making converts and baptizing them into the church. It established many branches and exerted influence in a radius of fifty miles.^[46]

There are many other churches of importance that owe their beginnings to Sandy Creek Church and the direction of Shubal Stearns. These three, however, were discussed so that the reader might have an idea as to how the Separate Baptist movement spread from the mother church. It should be noted here that Stearns felt a definite responsibility for all of these churches and traveled considerable distances in the country around to assist in organizing and regulating them.^[47] On October 16, 1765, in another letter to Alden, Stearns surveyed the situation thus: “The Lord carries on his work gloriously in sundry places in this province, and in Virginia, and South Carolina.”^[48]

While its influence continued strong in the west, Sandy Creek Church sent out other missionaries who ventured east of Haw River and south of the Neuse. By 1758, two churches, New River in Onslow, and Black River (probably in Sampson County) were branches of the mother church; and by 1762, a branch had also been formed as far as the coast in Brunswick County. Records show that on several occasions Stearns and Daniel Marshall visited these churches as well as others formed.^[49]

Sandy Creek Church and all the churches which were her branches made up the Sandy Creek Association, the oldest association in the state and the fourth in the country. Stearns, within three years after settling at Sandy Creek, began to see the need of an association as churches were constituted and these in turn began to branch out. Morgan Edwards gives the date of organization as June 2, 1758 with Sandy Creek, Abbott's Creek, and Deep River Churches being the constituents.^[50] On the other hand, Semple gives January, 1760 as the month of organization and July, 1760 as the month of the first meeting with eight churches represented. These churches and their pastors were:

Sandy Creek: Shubal Stearns; Deep River: Nathaniel Power; Abbott's Creek: Daniel Marshall; Little River: Joseph Breed; Neuse River: Ezekiel Hunter; Black River: Joseph Newton; Dan River: (Pittsylvania County, Virginia), Samuel Harris; and Lunenburg County, Virginia: William Murphy.”^[51] Still another given date for its organization is January, 1758.^[52] More than likely, the year 1758, month uncertain, is correct since Deep River Church, already extinct by 1760 (see page 7 above), was represented at the first meeting. Regardless of these organizational date discrepancies, the association still exists today although it has gone through periods of prosperity, diversity, and near extinction. Our discussion will consider first twelve years of existence before its first division took place.

It seems logical that since Stearns visited all of the early churches, it would not be difficult for him to convince their members of the need of an association to receive petitions and to appoint preachers to travel to new places where the gospel was likely to flourish. Needless to say, these meetings were also times of fellowship and a source of encouragement to those serving on the field, for when they assembled, “their chief employment was preaching, exhortation, singing, and conversing about their various exertions in the Redeemer's service, the success which had attended them and the new and prosperous scenes which were opening before them. These so inflamed the hearts: of the ministers that they would leave the Association with a zeal and courage which no common obstacles could impede.”^[53]

The first meeting of the association held at Sandy Creek was characterized by peace, love, and unity. James Read, who was present, described it thus: “We continued together three or four days. Great crowds of people; attended, mostly through curiosity. The great power of God was among us. The preaching every day seemed to be attended with God's blessing. We carried on our Association with street decorum and fellowship to the end. Then we took leave of one another, with many solemn charges from our reverend old father Shubael Stearns to stand fast unto the end.”^[54]

The next association^[55] was not as peaceful as the first. It was visited by Rev. John Gano, a Regular Baptist^[56] whom Rev. Stearns welcomed “with great affection.” The others accepted him less enthusiastically, however, because of an “unhappy shyness and jealousy between the Regulars and Separates.” In fact, he wasn't invited into the association until Rev. Stearns reprimanded the

group and asked them to invite Rev. Gano to preach. This they did, and although his methods and appeal were less emotional than the Separate ministers, hearts were soon warmed and opened to him.[57]

The third meeting in 1760 was marked with great enthusiasm, for churches were being newly established in North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina, and their pastors were “reporting how the work of the Lord was running and being glorified and bringing requests for more preachers to be sent . . .”[58]

Subsequent associational meetings received delegates from churches as far away as the mountains and sea. In fact, for twelve years, all Separate Baptists in Virginia and the two Carolinas were members of the association.[59]

Of great importance to each Separate Church was a covenant supposedly written by Stearns in 1757 by which each affiliating church abided. In essence, it reflected, Stearns' view as to what a church should be:

. . . a body of Christians who have unreservedly surrendered themselves to the service of God, living in sweet charity toward their brethren, seeking each the good of the other and of the church as a whole, supporting the ministry of the Lord, holding what they have and themselves always at the disposal of the Lord, not forsaking the assembling of themselves together, submitting themselves to the discipline of the church, as a part of Christ's mystical body, aided by the word and Spirit of God, looking for more light from God and believing that greater mysteries are still to be revealed . . .[60]

If Stearns was indeed the author of the covenant, one can readily see his depth of character and the genuine love which inspired the great Separate religious movement.

Two important matters came before the 1769 associational meeting. One dealt with a proposal for a union of the Separate Baptists and the Regular Baptists and the other concerned the Regulator movement. The Regular Baptist churches, whose number was few in the Sandy Creek area, attempted a union with the Separates in 1769, sending three of their own members to the annual meeting, pleading unity of all Baptists in the area. Their proposal was denied by a small majority on grounds that the Regular Baptists were not particular enough in matters such as women's dress.[61] More important, they

accepted membership of persons who were baptized before conversion.^[62]

The second item of business, concerning the Baptists' part in the Regulator movement, is open to some debate. Some writers have concluded that the Regulator movement was in no way a movement toward greater religious liberty but was strictly a resistance to civil oppression. This seems to be the view held by J. S. Bassett in *The Regulators of North Carolina (1765-1771)*: “The grievances of the Regulators were excessive taxes, dishonest sheriffs and extortionate fees. Each of these was made more intense by the scarcity of money.”^[63] Likewise, Judge John Haywood's account of the causes of the War of Regulation points out that the poor were treated with disdain and excluded from society. The rich lived extravagantly at the expense of the people. Those injured, petitioning for relief and being rejected, rose in bodies called the Regulators.^[64] These mentioned injustices can be classified as “civil oppression.” However, they are also moral issues capable of raising the righteous indignation of devout Christians wherever the issues have existed.

Others have convincingly maintained that the movement was not only civil, but for the Baptists in North Carolina, a fight for religious freedom as well. William Leffis Bennett, for example, in his doctoral thesis has traced the struggle from the very first Vestry Law passed in 1701 to its culmination in the American Revolution.^[65] The early settlers found religious toleration but not complete religious freedom for which many had left their New England homes. This is not to imply the Regulator movement was wholly a religious one, but that there is too much evidence indicating dissatisfaction with lack of religious freedom and lack of separation of church and state, rights for which Baptists have always been recognized as champions, to be totally ignored. Neither does this imply that it was merely a fight between Baptists and Loyalists. Other denominations, Quakers in particular, suffered the same injustices as the Baptists and the two denominations made up the bulk of the Regulators, although the Baptist group seemed to have been the most dominant.^[66]

To justify this point of view, it will be necessary to briefly note some of the Baptist grievances. The first Vestry Act of 1701 established the Church of England as the official church of the colony contrary to the promise of the Proprietors that religious liberty would be granted to all within the bounds of the Carolina province. This unjust law was one of the first to face the settlers

as they poured into the Yadkin Valley after the middle of the eighteenth century. Dissenters who refused to support the state church were excluded from voting, sitting on juries, and making laws of the state.^[67] Again in 1741, the assembly passed acts to tax the people, dissenters as well as others, for the support of the state church and its ministers. Ironically, those settlers in the Yadkin Valley were forced to pay taxes to support ministers that did not even exist in that part of the state.^[68] As it were, the Baptists were supporting their own ministers and helping to support those of the Church of England of whom they had never seen or heard. In addition, this law and its revision in 1764 also permitted only ministers of the Church of England to unite people in marriage or to perform funerals and to receive any fees for the services. If ministers of other churches performed such ceremonies, the minister of the established church could collect the fee by law.^[69] These laws were particularly hard on the Baptists, whose ministers did not receive a fixed salary. Injustices such as these continued to agitate the Baptists and Quakers and provided sturdy resistance so that by 1758 a group, later to be known as Regulators, numbering seven hundred strong had formulated demands into Articles demanding “that the Vestries should be abolished and that each denomination should pay its own ministers.”^[70] To show that these seven hundred were primarily Baptists, Paschal quotes an excerpt from the diary of Brother George Soelle, a Moravian missionary who made tours in the Yadkin Valley in 1771 through 1773 finding among the English speaking settlers “individual Baptists and Baptist families, and several Baptist churches, but hardly any of the other faiths.”^[71] Paschal also noted that by 1758, the people of the Yadkin Valley had been under the influence of three Baptist preachers — Stearns along the Yadkin River, Marshal on the Uwharrie and Abbott's Creek, and John Gano at the Jersey settlement — and had organized into the Sandy Creek Association. Also, he noted that it was unlikely that the Presbyterians made up any significant part of the group since they were furnishing soldiers for Tryon for the suppression of the Regulators. The Quakers, who suffered the same evils as the Baptists, made up the balance of the group and possibly for that reason, Governor Tryon called the Regulators a “faction of Quakers and Baptists who aimed at overturning the Church of England.”^[72]

Having established the fact that the settlers had religious grievances and that the majority of the Regulators were possibly Baptists, it now remains to

determine how much influence Shubal Stearns, Sandy Creek Church, and Sand Creek Association had in the Regulator movement.

Morgan Edwards' account of the matter leads one to believe that Baptists had very little to do with the Regulator movement. He says that of four thousand Regulators, only seven were Baptists and these were expelled from the churches.^[73] He based his conclusion on an inquiry as he traveled through the area in 1771-1772 and upon a resolve made at the October, 1769 Sandy Creek Associational meeting which read: "If any of our members shall take up arms against the legal authority or aid and abbet them that do so he shall be excommunicated & c."^[74] Henry Sheets, a North Carolina Baptist historian, and others refute Edwards, noting that Edwards himself was a Tory and wanted to portray Baptists as supporters of the Crown.^[75] In reality, however, the resolution seemed to be either ineffective or too late, because in 1766 the inhabitants of Sandy Creek sent a note to Governor Tryon saying, "There are 1000 of us fit to bear arms, and we are supporting the preachers of our own faith. We have as much right to demand that the Episcopalians help us support our pastor as they have to require us to aid theirs. Besides there are so few Episcopalians among us that if a clergyman were settled here there would be nothing for him to do, and the very presence of a vestryman among us is a grievance."^[76]

Many members of Sandy Creek Church and its branches were already Regulators by 1766, and although the church pastors might have upheld the 1769 resolution, it is unlikely that even a majority of the members did so since the Regulator movement was especially strong in the Baptist communities. Paschal agrees, saying that probably the whole body of Baptists were in the organization.^[77]

As for Shubal Stearns' part in the Regulator movement, there is no evidence that he was directly involved, although John Baskin declared that Stearns' preaching "quicken'd the spirit of democracy among hearers . . . and promoted them to make resistance known as the Regulator movement."^[78] It is not clear from where he drew his conclusions for Paschal says that Stearns did all he could to keep the members of the Sandy Creek Association out of the Regulator movement.^[79] It is true that Stearns wielded great persuasive influence on his members and could have excited their patriotic zeal. However, it is also true that he was peace-loving and an advocate of harmony

and unlikely that he would have done so. More than likely, it was Herman Husband, the formulator of the Regulator plans of resistance and also a resident of Sandy Creek, who had the most to do with recruiting the area Baptists.^[80] The only citable evidence of Stearns' political involvement was his petition in 1771 to Governor Martin and the people of Orange and Guilford Counties for the pardon of Thomas Welborn and John Pugh, who were outlawed for “several acts of outrage” in connection with the Regulator movement.^[81] There was also speculation that Stearns wrote: *A Fan for Fanning and A Touchstone for Tryon*, an account of the Regulator movement. Governor Swain attributed it to Stearns^[82] although others hold Husband as its author.^[83]

Regardless of the extent of involvement, the Sandy Creek Baptists were greatly affected by the War of Regulation and in particular the Battle of Alamance on May 16, 1771, which took place within twenty miles northeast of the Sandy Creek Church. When the Regulators and the Royal forces clashed, the Regulators were defeated and over two hundred killed on the battlefield. Others were taken prisoners, some were hanged, some fled, and still others took oaths of allegiance and returned home.^[84] The abuse of political power by local government officials, the religious grievances, and other atrocities that were a part of the war were too much for many of the settlers. Hoping for better times in other areas, fifteen hundred families left the area in 1771 and others followed in 1772. Sandy Creek Church suffered a reduced membership from 606 to fourteen.^[85] Many went to South Carolina; in fact, nine of the original sixteen constituent members now made their homes there. Some crossed the Savannah and began Baptist work in Georgia,^[86] while others settled in Tennessee and Kentucky, constituting the first Baptist churches there.^[87]

Paschal compared the result of the Baptist exodus from the Yadkin Valley to that of the early persecuted Christians driven from Jerusalem. “The Baptists scattered abroad went to their new homes preaching Baptist principles and establishing Baptist churches on the new frontiers in Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia.”^[88] Many still exist and are strong holds of the Baptist faith. Therefore, to measure the influence that was made by the first little Separate Baptist Church in North Carolina is impossible.

To return to the Sandy Creek Association, the 1770 meeting met at Grassy

Creek Church in Granville County. This meeting was noted for disunity because, as Morgan Edwards said, the association was taking too much power from the individual churches, which was contrary to the idea of local autonomy. Interferences included procedures of ordination, the qualifications of ministers, and domestic concerns. At the conclusion of the meeting, it was unanimously voted to divide the association into three divisions, one for the South Carolina churches, one for the Virginia churches, and Sandy Creek remaining for the North Carolina churches. These newly organized bodies took steps to avoid the problems that had led to disunion of the mother organization.^[89]

There is little record of Sandy Creek Association again until official minutes were first kept in 1805.

On September 7, 1769, a little before his death, Shubal Stearns experienced an uncommon phenomenon. As he was ascending a hill on his way home, he saw a white heap like snow in the horizon. As he approached it, the heap stood suspended in the air fifteen or twenty feet above the ground. As it fell to the ground, it divided into three parts. The greatest moved northward, another moved southward, and the least, although brighter than the other two, remained where it fell, “The bright heap,” Stearns interpreted, “is our religious interest; which will divide and spread north and south, but chiefly northward; while a small part remains at sandycreek [sic].^[90] His interpretation proved accurate, for as we have seen, in 1770 Sandy Creek Baptist Association divided. After the dispersion of Baptists in 1771 and 1772, those groups in Virginia became the strongest of the three.

On November 20, 1771, Stearns died and was later buried near his beloved little church. In 1955, two hundred years after the founding of the church, some eight hundred people gathered at that site to honor the memory of the Yankee missionary who began it. A twelve-foot granite monument was unveiled on the site of the original church, only fifty yards from the present church, and only a few feet away from Stearns' two-centuries old grave, which until this time had only been marked by a small slab, “In memory of Rev. Shubal Stearns who organized the Sandy Creek Missionary Baptist Church in the year 1755, and departed this life November 20, 1771.” The original marker, a native rock with Stearns' initials and death etched into the stone, had been placed in the state museum in Raleigh.^[91]

Stearns left no descendants. However, Baptists in more than four states for over two hundred years have been heirs to the tradition as set forth and expounded by this little giant. In fact, thousands of churches probably have arisen from the efforts of Shubal Stearns and the church at Sandy Creek. Consequently, by 1801, this surging Separate Baptist movement had absorbed most of the General Baptists and had allowed the Regulars (also called Particular Baptists) to merge with it.^[92] “In no small degree, it may be believed that the number and prosperity of the Baptists within the limits of the Southern Baptist Convention is [sic] largely due, under God's blessing, to work begun by Elder Stearns . . .”^[93] This being true, his influence lives on in every state in the union and in every country of the world as God's word is preached by Southern Baptists.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Some authorities spell his name “Shubael”, but Stearns himself spelled it “Shubal” in *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*. See William L. Saunders, ed. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*. V (Raleigh: Presses of Edwards & Broughton, 1887), p. 1166, hereinafter cited as Saunders, *Colonial Records*.

[2] For a thorough study of Separate Baptist origins, expansion; and theology see William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent 1630-1883*, I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 329-569. Summarizing briefly: Charging that the New England Congregationalist Churches were spiritually dead, corrupt, and too formal, two groups, the Old Lights and the New Lights sprang forth after 1740. Both were Calvinistic, but the Old Lights consisted mostly of the wealthy, educated, and ruling class. The New Lights, on the other hand, were evangelical pietists from the poorer, less educated, ranks who held that the believer did not need to depend on learned clergy and those from the upper social orders to interpret God's will. There were two kinds of New Lights: non-separating moderates who wished to reform the churches from within and the radical Separates who felt the churches were too corrupt and the only choice for the true Christian was to come out from within and be separate. As many Separates moved into positions of leadership in Baptist Churches, they came to be known as Separate Baptists. Shubal Stearns associated himself with this denomination.

[3] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. xxix.

[4] George Washington Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists*, I (Raleigh: The General Board North Carolina Baptist State Convention, 1930), p. 254, hereinafter cited as Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 254-264.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 265.

[7] Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950), p. 246.

[8] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 286, citing Robert B. Semple.

[9] Morgan Edwards MS, “Materials Toward a History of the Baptists, 1770-1772,” Wake Forest University Library, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, p. 20. (Typewritten copy of the original which can be found at Furman

University, Greenville, South Carolina.) Hereinafter cited as Edwards, "Materials."

[10] George W. Purefoy, *A History of Sandy Creek Baptist Association from Its Organization in A.D. 1758 to A.D. 1858* (New York: Sheldon & Co., Publishers, 1859), p. 291, hereinafter cited as Purefoy, *Sandy Creek Association*.

[11] Edwards, "Materials," p. 18 gives the place of baptism as Windsor, Connecticut.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 20; Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists*, II (Newton, Massachusetts: Backus Historical Society, 1871), p. 530 gives the date. Hereinafter cited as Backus, *Christians Called Baptists*.

[13] Backus, *Christians Called Baptists*, II, p. 530 notes that in July, 1757, Stearns baptized Mr. Noah Alden of Stratford and the next month left for the South.

[14] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1166.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 1167.

[16] *Ibid.* Also see Lewis Peyton Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, Virginia: J. P. Bell Co., Inc., 1938), pp. 21-22, hereinafter cited as Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*.

[17] Backus, *Christians Called Baptists*, II, p. 530, citing Stearns.

[18] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1167; Edwards, "Materials," p. 18; Also portions of Stearns' experiences to North Carolina are found in David Benedict, *General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*. II (Boston: Manning & Lorin, No. 2, Cornhill, 1813), pp. 37 ff., hereinafter cited as Benedict, *General History*. This is the first mention in any reference to others in Stearns company besides Daniel Marshall.

[19] Edwards, "Materials," p. 1. General Baptists did not adhere to the rigorous Calvinistic principles as did the Separates. (See p. 10 above)

[20] Purefoy, *Sandy Creek Association*, pp. 35-41.

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

[22] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1167.

[23] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 275. Edwards, “Materials,” p. 7 and R. D. W. Conner, *History of North Carolina*, I (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1919), p.[page number could not be read] give the figure to be “upwards of 900 communicants.”

[24] “Early History of the Baptists in North Carolina . . . No. 2;” *Biblical Recorder*, October 9, 1889, p. 1, hereinafter cited as “Early History.”

[25] Edwards, “Materials,” p. 21.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22 quoting Tiden Lane.

[27] Purefoy, *Sandy Creek Association*, pp. 46-47.

[28] Edwards, “Materials,” pp. 26-27. Elnathan Davis was born on November 9, 1735 in Baltimore County, Maryland. He was bred a Seventh-day Baptist and lived near James River in Virginia until 1757 when he moved to Haw River.

[29] John Baskin, “Religious Revolution Started by Yankee Preacher 212 Years Ago gave Birth to Southern Baptists,” *Charity and Children* (Thomasville. N. C.), March 9, 1967, p. 4, hereinafter cited as Baskin, “Revolution.”

[30] Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise And Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, Revised and extended by G. W. Beale (Richmone: Pitt & Dickerson, Publishers, 1894 [Original, 1810] p. 13 hereinafter cited as Semple, *Virginia Baptists*.

[31] Edwards, “Materials,” pp. 17-18.

[32] “Early History,” p. 1.

[33] William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), p. 11. hereinafter cited as Sweet, *Religion*.

[34] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1169.

[35] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 227 quoting Morgan Edwards.

[36] Abbott's Creek still exists as a strong southern Baptist Church.

[37] See Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1168 for details of his ordination.

[38] *North Carolina Baptist Historical Papers*, II (Anderson, North Carolina: North Carolina Baptist Historical Society, 1896) , hereinafter cited as *Baptist Papers*.

- [39] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 387
- [40] *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- [41] *Baptist Papers*, p. 13.
- [42] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*. I, pp. 394, 299, 408, 390, and 384.
- [43] *Ibid.*, pp. 294-295.
- [44] *Ibid.*, p. 297 quoting from Backus, *Abridgment*, Chapter XIV.
- [45] *Ibid.*
- [46] *Ibid.*, pp. 300 ff. and 481.
- [47] Little, *Imprisoned Preachers*, p. 46.
- [48] Backus, *Christians Called Baptists*, p. 531.
- [49] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, pp. 304-306.
- [50] Edwards, "Materials," p. 9.
- [51] Semple, *Virginia Baptists*, p. 64.
- [52] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1170
- [53] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 283.
- [54] Semple, *Virginia Baptist*, p. 65.
- [55] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, p. 268 gives its date as October, 1759.
- [56] The Regular Baptists and the Separate Baptists differed primarily on the issue of baptism before conversion.
- [57] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1171,
- [58] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, pp. 397-398.
- [59] Semple, *Virginia Baptists*, p. 45.
- [60] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 403. For a complete copy of the covenant, see pp. 401-402.
- [61] *Ibid.*, pp. 399-400.
- [62] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1177.
- [63] John S. Bassett, *The Regulators of North Carolina* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896), p. 150, hereinafter cited as Bassett, *The Regulators*.

- [64] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 653.
- [65] William Leffis Bennett, "Factors in the Struggle for Religious Liberty in North Carolina" (unpublished Th.D. Dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1965, microfilmed copy at the Wake Forest University Library). Also see Charles B. Williams, *A History of Baptists in North Carolina* (Raleigh: Presses of Edwards & Broughton, 1901), pp. 21-55 and Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, II, pp. 42-61.
- [66] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, II, p. 48.
- [67] *Baptist Papers*, III, p. 138.
- [68] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, II, p. 47.
- [69] *Ibid.*
- [70] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- [71] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- [72] Saunders, *Colonial Record*, V, p. 655.
- [73] Edwards, "Materials," p. 35.
- [74] *Ibid.*
- [75] Henry L. Sheets, *A History of the Liberty Baptist Association from Its Organization in 1832 to 1906* (Raleigh: Presses of Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1907), p. 154; Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 365.
- [76] *Baptist Papers*, II, p. 21.
- [77] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 368, His conclusion is borne out by Saunders, *Colonial Records*, VII, p. xxxii.
- [78] Baskin, "Revolution," p. 4.
- [79] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 296, probably basing his statement on the 1769 resolution.
- [80] William S. Powell, James K. Huhta, and Thomas J. Farnham, eds. and compilers, *The Regulators in North Carolina, A Documentary History, 1759-1776* (Raleigh: State Department of Archives & History, 1971), p. 584.
- [81] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, IX, pp. 26-30.
- [82] Bassett, *The Regulators*, p. 142.

- [83] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 363.
- [84] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, VIII, p. 653; Purefoy, *Sandy Creek Association*, p. 47
- [85] Saunders, *Colonial Records*, V, p. 1169.
- [86] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, pp. 385 and 389.
- [87] *Ibid.*, II, p. 414, citing Benedict; John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972), p. 4, hereinafter cited as Boles, *The Great Revival*.
- [88] Paschal, *North Carolina Baptists*, I, p. 381.
- [89] *Ibid.*, pp. 403-406.
- [90] Edwards, "Materials," p. 22.
- [91] Baskin, "Revolution," p. 4.
- [92] Boles, *The Great Revival*, p. 4. The Regular Baptists were less evangelistic than the Separates.
- [93] *Baptist Papers*, II, p. 101.

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Presents a detailed account of religious grievances in North Carolina, beginning in 1701 and progressing through the Revolution.

Edwards, Morgan, MS. "Materials toward A History of the Baptists, 1770-1772." Wake Forest University Library, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. (Typewritten copy of the original which may be found at Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina.)

Materials gathered as a result of travel in eastern America. The portion of the manuscript used included information about Georgia and North Carolina Baptists and was gathered during 1770-1772.

PUBLISHED

Primary

Backus, Isaac. *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists.* 3 Vols.; Newton, Massachusetts: Backus Historical Society, 1871.

A detailed history of New England baptists giving an eye-witness account of much described. Where this was not possible, Backus placed himself in closest possible connection with the accounts by personal acquaintance with the actors and through examination of records and other evidence.

North Carolina Baptist Historical Papers. 3 Vols. Henderson, North Carolina: North Carolina Baptist Historical Society, 1896.

Presents carefully prepared papers on every phase of Baptist life in North Carolina, consisting of original biographical and historical sketches, and the republication of rare and inaccessible prints. Supplemented by historical notes and criticisms.

Powell, William S., James K. Huhta, and Thomas J. Farnham, eds. *The Regulators in North Carolina, A Documentary History, 1759-1776*. Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1971.

Documents concerning the Regulator movement in North Carolina. Of value for a study such as this only if *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* are inaccessible.

Saunders, William L. ed. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*. 10 Vols. Raleigh: Presses of Edwards & Broughton, 1886-1890

Compilation of ten volumes of official records of North Carolina dating through 1776. The series is continued as *The State Records* of North Carolina, 1776-1790 and compiled and edited by Walter Clark.

Secondary

Baskin, John. "Religious Revolution Started by Yankee Preacher 212 Years Ago Gave Birth to Southern Baptists." *Charity and Children*. (Thomasville, N. C.), March 9, 1967, p. 4.

Gives a brief sketch of Shubal Stearns and the author's opinion of Stearns' importance in Southern Baptist history.

Bassett, John S. *The Regulators of North Carolina*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896.

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Account of Baptist history obtained through travel, reading books, collecting pamphlets, reading minutes of associational meetings, etc. Seldom footnoted, although prolific in use of details.

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McLoughlin, William G. *New England Dissent 1630-1833*. 2 Vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Gives the “hows” and “whys” of New England dissent, tracing the results. Several chapters deal with the Baptist movements, including much about the Separates who infiltrated the South.

Paschal, George Washington. *History of North Carolina Baptists*. 2 Vols. Raleigh: The General Board North Carolina Baptist State Convention, 1930.

An excellent and comprehensive history of the Baptists in North Carolina, based primarily on original sources. Written by a Baptist about Baptist ideas, sentiments, religious life, principles, people, and influence.

Purefoy, George W. *A History of Sandy Creek Baptist Association from its Organization in 1758 to A.D. 1858*. New York: Sheldon & Co., Publishers, 1859.

This book is an extension of a sermon preached on October 3, 1858. The first seventy pages deal with the origin of Baptists from the first century A.D. until 1805 and the organization of Sandy Creek Baptist Association. The balance consists of associational minutes from 1805-1858. There are also brief sketches of pastors and churches.

Semple, Robert B. *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, Revised and extended by G. W. Beale Richmond: Pitt & Dickerson, Publishers, 1897. [Original, 1810].

A history of the Virginia Baptists, this unpolished source records foibles and failures as well as virtues and praises. The author used manuscripts, talked with living people, used tables, etc.

Sheets, Henry L. *A History of the Liberty Baptist Association from its Organization in 1832 to 1906*. Raleigh: Presses of Edwards & Broughton Printing Co., 1907.

Contains history connected with this body, including beginnings of Sandy Creek Association which was the mother association of Liberty.

Sweet, William Warren. *Religion on the American Frontier*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931.

This book has merit in dealing with many aspects of Colonial Baptist history. It has only a few pages which deal with my topic, but these few highly praise Stearns and his church as early leaders of Baptists (Separates) in the South.

Torbet, Robert C. *A History of the Baptists*. Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950.

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A short history of North Carolina Baptists which gives a brief account of Sandy Creek and the Regulator movement. References are not cited, but the information is basically correct when compared with primary sources.