

“Don’t Forget to Remember!”**

by J. Stanley Lemons, Ph.D.¹

Don’t forget to remember! We are what we remember. If you forget to remember, you will lose your past. History to a church is what memory is to a person. A church that forgets its past is like a person who has Alzheimer’s: you become someone else.

A favorite Bible verse for me is Isaiah 51:1 which commands: “Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance, you who seek the LORD; look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged.”

Happy anniversary to all of you at Greenville Baptist Church! Congratulations to you for taking a moment to think about “the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged.”

I am honored and pleased to be asked to undertake this little exercise in remembering the past, and I found your church’s history to be rich and interesting. Much to my professional delight, I have found some things that had been forgotten. Being an outsider – that is, not a member of Greenville Baptist—and being a professional historian, I could come with a new and critical eye to your history. I brought particular interests in historical scholarship that caused me to look for certain things, such as the evolution of the role of women in the church as well as the larger context in which Greenville Baptist has existed. I can only talk about some of my findings today, otherwise, you would be here for some hours, instead of some minutes.

** This is an expanded version of the much briefer talk presented on September 25, 2010 at the 190th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Greenville Baptist Church.

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were of the Particular variety.³ By 1730 New England had seventeen Baptist churches and thirteen of them were General Six-Principle churches, most of which were in RI.⁴ Then came the First Great Awakening which swept the American colonies from New England to Georgia from the 1740s to the 1760s, and the Particular Baptists expanded dramatically, overwhelming the other varieties. The General Six-Principle Baptists tended to be confined to the rural areas of Rhode Island, while most of the other Baptist churches in the rest of New England and the American colonies were basically Calvinist in theology. In the 1780s a reaction against Calvinism began in upper New England which produced the Freewill Baptist denomination that led to the establishment of the Greenville Baptist Church in 1820.⁵

Your genesis story is found on page one of Volume I of your *Church Records*. It tells how John Colby, an itinerate Freewill Baptist evangelist from New Hampshire came to northwestern Rhode Island about 1812 and began preaching the Freewill Baptist message and sparked a revival that produced Rhode Island's first Freewill Baptist Church in Pascoag. There were already Baptists sprinkled all around out in the western parts of

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⁴ Added in the 18th century to the first list were Richmond (1723), Old Warwick (c. 1725), So. Scituate (1725), Everett Church-Usquepaugh, [So. Kingstown] (1725), Elder Ballou's Meeting [Cumberland] (1732), Fulling Mill [Appanoag] (1744), Burrillville (1749?), Coventry [Maple Root Church] (1762); Cranston (1764), Foster (1769), Johnston /Graniteville-split from 1st Baptist, Providence (1771), 2nd Fulling Mill (1785).

⁵ In fact, a reaction to Calvinism had begun as early as 1770 when the doctrine of universal salvation (Universalism) was brought to the colonies by John Murray, an English Methodist. Universalism especially took root in the ranks of the Congregational church in the period from 1779 to the 1820s. In 1779 in Gloucester, MA as the result of a split in the local Congregational church, Murray founded the first Universalist church in America, called the Independent Christian Church. In 1793 he became the pastor of the First Universalist Society of Boston. Another reaction to Calvinism, particularly among the Congregationalists, was Unitarianism, which was clearly established in this same period, splitting the Congregational church into Trinitarian and Unitarian churches all over New England. The Freewill movement was a Baptist response to the dominant Calvinism among Baptists, but a variant of Baptist Unitarianism also developed in the 1810s and 1820s, calling themselves Christian Baptists or Christians. Fourth Baptist Church in Providence, founded in 1823 flirted with being a Unitarian Baptist church, and Zalmon Tobey [see p. 12 below] was a Unitarian Baptist for a few years before reverting to strict Calvinism.

It has been said, "Where two or three Baptists are gathered, there you have a schism!" Baptists have been divided by many issues from the time they first appeared in the early 1600s, and the most fundamental and basic one was the understanding of the atonement by Jesus Christ. Who benefits from His sacrifice? Everybody? Or just those chosen by God? The very first Baptists in the early 1600s were General Baptists, that is, they believed that Christ's atonement was for everyone and that everyone had a chance at salvation and eternal life. You had to make the right choice, but you had a choice. The other kind of Baptists that appeared about 1630 were Particular Baptists. They were Calvinists who believed in predestination and that salvation was only for the few that God had elected or selected to be saved. All the rest were damned.

The two original Baptist churches founded in America in 1638 and 1644, in Providence and Newport, were founded by Particular Baptists. Roger Williams and John Clarke were both Particular Baptists. However, the Providence church had become a General Six-Principle Baptist Church by 1652, and the Newport church suffered a split in 1656 which produced the 2nd Baptist Church of Newport, which was also a General Six-Principle Baptist church. And, then 1st Baptist of Newport suffered another split in 1671 that produced the first 7th Day Baptist Church in America. So, the old Baptist tendency to multiply by dividing was quite evident back in the 17th century.

By 1700 there were ten Baptist Churches in New England (thirteen in the whole American colonies): six of them were General Six-Principle Baptist churches,² and three

² 1st Providence (1638); 2nd Newport (1656), Swansea (1680), North Kingstown (c. 1664), 1st Tiverton (1680); E. Greenwich (c. 1700). In 1701 1st Smithfield was added to the list as Joshua Winsor went out from 1st Providence to gather a church.

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the state, but they were mostly General Six Principle Baptists, who already held the idea of general atonement. So, they were vulnerable to a fresh version of it.

John Colby had tuberculosis and died from it in 1817, and the revival died with him.⁶ However, in late 1818 a new Freewill evangelist arrived from Vermont, and this was Clarissa H. Danforth, and her work led directly to the Greenville church. Let me read what your *Church Records* said of her:

About the fore part of July Eighteen hundred and nineteen the Lord sent a preacher to Rhode Island by the name of Clarissa Danforth of Weathersfield Vermont[.] She is the most remarkable female that ever was raised up in these parts that we have any account [of] She was called to the ministry when quite young and has traveled Through a number of States and her Labours have been wonderfully blessed and it may be said with propriety that She is one that is called and Sent forth of God to Preach the everlasting Gospel of Christ for her works manifest the same and no Doubt but thousands will now re- [coun]t ever they heard her voice and will for ever Shine as Stars in [the] crown of Rejoicing— Curiosity Led many to go and hear what the female Stranger had to say and many Dated their Conviction from the time they first heard her preach=⁷

She began preaching to the Freewill church in Pascoag in October 1818 and then spread her message in 1819 to Glocester and Smithfield in a revival that lasted some eighteen months. In April 1820 she was joined by Joseph White from Maine, and with him the Greenville Church was constituted on May 16, 1820. You may note that when

⁶ In January 1817 Colby went to Providence to consult with Stephen Gano, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Providence, because Gano was a trained physician. Gano urged him to leave the cold climate of New England and go to a warmer place, otherwise he might not live another year. So, Colby left Burrillville and Glocester on January 25, 1817 to take passage in Providence for the South. However, the Providence River was frozen and overland travel would be arduous, so Gano invited Colby to reside with him until the river thawed. But, even five weeks later the river remained frozen, so Colby traveled overland to New London and took a steamboat to New York in March. He returned to his father's home in Vermont for the summer, and then sailed to Virginia, arriving there on October 31, 1817. He died in Norfolk, VA on November 23, 1817. See John Colby, *The Life, Experience and Travels of John Colby—Preacher of the Gospel*—written by himself (his diary, published in 1854); *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia: Historical and Biographical*, edited and compiled by G. A. Burgess & J.T. Ward, (Chicago: Free Baptist Cyclopaedia Co., 1889), p. 128.

⁷ *Church Records of Greenville Baptist*, Vol. I, p. 1; the account of her first preaching in Pascoag as found in the *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia* gave the date as October 1818, p. 149.

the church was established, its first settled minister was a man. It would be a rare thing for a Freewill Baptist church to have an ordained woman for a settled minister, but women were also licensed as evangelists.⁸ Still, the point here is that Greenville Baptist Church was born as a result of a revival.

Greenville Baptist did not have a meetinghouse until 1822, so they met about once a month on Saturday for a business meeting at the school house in Harmony, and then the next day, once a month on Sunday, for public worship at the Greene Academy, which was located about where the Smithfield Plumbing Supply is today. Church was an all-day affair back then. Elder Joseph White usually preached in the morning followed by baptisms "by the waterside," and then Sister Clarissa Danforth often preached in the afternoon. The afternoon service often ended by observing the Lord's Supper. Your records show Clarissa Danforth last preaching at Greenville on August 5, 1821 and offering the opening prayer at the business meeting on October 6, 1821. After that she left, married a man in Pomfret, Connecticut, in 1822, moved to western New York, and rarely preached again.⁹

Have you ever thought about how tough it was to go to church back in the 1820s and 1830s? Greenville had only five houses at that time along with the Greene Academy, the Waterman Tavern, and a couple of other buildings. This tiny village had developed at

⁸ The Union Freewill Baptist Church (commonly called the Line Freewill Baptist Church) called Louisa Fenner as their settled minister from 1878 to 1882. She was originally a member of the Chepachet Freewill Baptist Church and was ordained there in 1878. She preached a 45-day revival in the Union church and was then called by them. See: Margery I. Matthews, et al., *Churches of Foster: A History of Religious Life in Rural Rhode Island* (North Foster Baptist Church, 1978), p. 86. A search in the *Free Baptist Cyclopedia* turned up seven women besides Clarissa Danforth who were licensed or ordained. Two of these, Anna Store Anderson (1839) and Ruby Knapp Bixby (1847) were licensed, but never ordained, and the others were ordained much later in the century: Louisa Fenner (1878), Caroline Amelia Bassett (1881), Anna Barton (1886), Mary S. Calkins (1886), and Ada Kennan (1886).

⁹ See the entry about her in the *Free Baptist Cyclopedia* (1889), pp. 148-149.

the intersection of two dirt roads.¹⁰ The roads were little more than rutted wagon tracks, and most people had to travel several miles to get to church meetings. So, do not be surprised that they met only once or twice a month. Besides that, the pastor was not available many Sundays, as he preached elsewhere and headed up “branch churches” in Chepachet and Mendon, Massachusetts.

Did you catch that? The Greenville Baptist Church had several “branch churches” in the 1820s and 1830s. You were the *mother* church to Freewill Baptist churches in Mendon, Chepachet, and North Scituate, and – here’s something that no one ever mentioned in your histories – a branch church for African-Americans in Providence. Yes, this church had an African-American branch from at least July 1823 to 1830. In 1823 they licensed Samuel Daily, a black member of this church

to gather such of his colored Brethren and Sisters as he can fellowship and walk with and to have the watch care over them to look after them & also to have the privilege to appoint Church meetings among themselves.¹¹

What was done in that African-American branch was under the jurisdiction of Greenville Baptist Church, as it renewed Samuel Daily’s license to preach,¹² and voted from time to time to approve or investigate what was happening in the branch church.¹³ Greenville had to approve disciplinary measures taken against members of the branch church. For instance, on February 17, 1827, they approved of the “excommunication” of

¹⁰ See: *Historic and Architectural Resources of Smithfield, Rhode Island* (Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1992), pp. 10-11.

¹¹ *Church Records*, Saturday July 19, 1823. Samuel Daily had joined Greenville by letter from the 2nd Baptist Church of North Providence in February 1822. The 2nd Baptist Church of North Providence had come into existence in 1818 as a remnant of the derelict North Providence Meeting that had been pastored by Elder Rufus Tefft in the 1790s, some Baptist residents in the Fruit Hill section, and some members from the 1st Baptist Church in Providence came together to establish a new church. The pastor at 2nd Baptist was Zalmon Tobey, who had baptized Samuel Daily, probably in 1821.

¹² *Church Records*, March 19, 1825, May 14, 1825.

¹³ *Church Records*, October 7, 1826; December 15, 1826

four members of the branch church for “disorderly walking.”¹⁴ And, another instance in August 1828 Greenville approved on Daily’s disownment of a husband and wife for “disorderly behavior.”¹⁵ Another couple who had been dismissed from the branch came to the church meeting in Greenville, made “humble acknowledgment” of their sins and was restored to membership. Interestingly enough, then a question was raised about some disorderly behavior of Samuel Daily himself.¹⁶ Twice in 1829 the church considered and postponed action about Samuel Daily, and then he was finally “disowned” by the church in November 1830.¹⁷ The African-American “branch” is never mentioned again, but on December 20, 1834 the church voted “that the Coloured persons baptized by Br [Reuben] Allen on the 30th day of Last November in Providence be Admitted to the Right Hand of Fellowship in this Church.”¹⁸ However, their names do not appear on the church membership list.

This activity among African-Americans in Providence leads me to think that those people in the African Union Meeting and School who became Freewill Baptists in the early 1830s and who eventually split off to found the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Providence were the same ones that Samuel Daily preached to and that Rev. Reuben Allen baptized in November 1834. The Abyssinian Baptist Church is today called the

¹⁴ *Church Records*, February 17, 1827.

¹⁵ *Church Records*, August 16, 1828. “...received a letter from Br. Samuel Daily representing that the Branch in Providence had withdrawn the hand of fellowship from James Franklin and his wife for disorderly behavior: voted that the said letter be approved and the said members dismissed. Brother John Daniels and his wife, Lucy Daniels, formerly members of this Church and belonging to the branch in Providence, came forward made a humble acknowledgement and were again received as members.”

¹⁶ *Church Records*, August 16, 1828: “Voted that Br. Grant be appointed to Convey a letter to Br. Samuel Daily from the Church respecting his disorderly behavior.”

¹⁷ The church membership roll says he was “disowned” November 14, 1830, but there are no minutes for that date.

¹⁸ *Church Records*, December 20, 1834.

Pond Street Baptist Church and is probably the oldest black Baptist church in Rhode Island. Pond Street is celebrating its 180th anniversary this November 5-7.¹⁹

Let me quickly deal with the other branch churches: Mendon, Chepachet, and North Scituate. All of these churches were a consequence of the itinerate preaching of John Colby, Clarissa Danforth, Joseph White, and other Freewill preachers, including Reuben Allen. The Mendon, Massachusetts, branch was under the direct leadership of your pastor for preaching, baptisms, and the Lord's Supper. It reported its activities to Greenville, and its members were listed on your church membership list. One of the reasons that Joseph White could not preach every Sunday in Greenville was because he was preaching at Mendon as well as attending the church business meetings up there on the fourth Saturday of each month, and he preached in Chepachet on another Sunday. The Mendon branch was set off as a separate church in 1822, and twenty-eight people who were on the membership list of Greenville Baptist, but who lived in Mendon, were dismissed to be the founding members of that church.²⁰ Likewise, in 1822, twenty-three people on the Greenville membership list were dismissed to form the "Baptist Church of Christ in Gloucester," which was later called the Chepachet Freewill Baptist Church. Most of you are probably familiar with their old meetinghouse which is just west of the

¹⁹ The African Union Meeting and School-House was organized in 1819-1820 as a non-denominational meeting and school for the black community in Providence. African-Americans from all of the white evangelical churches began to attend the African Union Meeting. Then, in the 1830s a series of sectarian splits saw most of the members leave to form individual churches. The Freewill Baptists formed the Abyssinian Baptist Church [now Pond Street] by at least 1835, if not earlier, and Bethel A.M.E Zion Church separated in September 1838. The remnant, Regular (Calvinist) Baptists then established the Meeting Street Baptist Church [now Congdon Street] in December 1840.

²⁰ See entries in the *Church Records* regarding the Mendon church: April 8, 1821; May 19, 1821; August 31, 1821; October 20, 1821; December 2, 1821, and finally October 19, 1822 where they noted that the Mendon church had been "embodied" with David Sweet as Elder. Elder Joseph White also baptized a number of individuals in Slatersville: See *Church Records*, September 2, 1821.

intersection of RI 100 and US 44.²¹ Reuben Allen is listed as Chepachet's first settled minister from 1822 to 1829, even though he preached at several other places during that period.

Your most significant branch church was the North Scituate Baptist Church. Baptists, including Reuben Allen, had been worshiping in homes in North Scituate for about 10 years prior to 1832. Allen, beginning in 1822, rode a Freewill preaching circuit that stretched from Chepachet, to North Scituate, Pawtucket, Mendon, Rehoboth, and Taunton, a circuit of about 80 miles that he covered every five weeks.²² For a time in 1830-1831 the Baptists in North Scituate shared a meetinghouse with the Congregationalists until they were kicked out by the Congregationalists. So, in 1832 they became a branch of the Greenville Baptist Church and continued as such until they hived off in 1835. Greenville Baptist dismissed 126 people in 1835 to establish the North Scituate church.²³ Reuben Allen, who had become the settled minister of Greenville Baptist Church in 1829, now became the pastor of **both** churches and served **both** as their settled minister until he resigned from Greenville in 1839.²⁴

One ought to note that the Smithfield Seminary, later known as the Lapham Institute was located in North Scituate. Reuben Allen was a major player in helping to raise the money for that seminary which was incorporated in 1839 – the same year he

²¹ The builder of the Chepachet meetinghouse in 1821 also erected the Greenville meetinghouse in 1821-1822.

²² For an account (somewhat inaccurate) about Reuben Allen, see: *Free Baptist Cyclopedia* (1889), pp. 14-15.

²³ See the membership lists (arranged separately by male and female) in the *Church Records*, Vol. I.

²⁴ Greenville would be without a settled minister from 1839 to 1843, and in 1840 the church voted to request Reuben Allen to preach at least once a month for them. See: *Church Records*, April 18, 1840. Even after that, Allen looked after the interests of the Greenville church in some ways, as they voted to have him represent Greenville at the Rhode Island Quarterly Meeting of the Freewill Baptists in 1841. See: *Church Records*, January 16, 1841. Allen continued as the minister of North Scituate until he resigned there in 1845. He spent the next year founding a church in Coventry and returned to North Scituate from 1847 to 1849, and then served a third term from 1852 to 1855. He died in North Scituate in 1872 at age 76.

resigned at Greenville to focus on North Scituate. The first principal of the seminary in 1840 was Hosea Quinby, who was to become Greenville's third settled minister beginning in 1843.²⁵ He resigned as minister in 1845 as he struggled to run the seminary.²⁶ It had cost \$22,000 to start the seminary, [that is about \$480,000 in today's money] including the land and buildings. But, the cost of the property was more than the amount of stock sold to build the school, so they had to sell some of the property. In 1850 Rev. Quinby bought the seminary and tried to continue it as a private enterprise, but he mismanaged it and had to sell out in 1854.²⁷ Five years later the school closed entirely and passed into other hands. It remained vacant until 1863 when a new effort was made, led by William Winsor, a graduate of the seminary and a member of Greenville Baptist Church. He enlisted the sympathies of Benedict Lapham. He and Lapham purchased the property and turned it over to the Rhode Island Free Baptist Association. It reopened as the Lapham Institute. They spent \$5000 making repairs. [\$69,000 in today's money] However, the Institute fell into debt again, and William Winsor sought to rescue it by

²⁵ Hosea Quinby (1804-1878) was serving the Greenville church by the spring of 1843, as he was elected the moderator on April 15, 1843. Born in Sandwich, NH, Quinby was a school teacher in NH and ME before being converted in the summer of 1824. Licensed in 1827, he taught a year at New Hampton Institution. In 1829 he entered Waterville College [now Colby] where he graduated in 1832. It was said of him that he was the first Freewill Baptist to go to college with the intension of becoming a minister. Ordained in Sandwich, NH June 2, 1833, he taught at the just-founded Parsonsfield Seminary in Maine and became its first principal. In 1839 he was chosen principal of the Smithfield Seminary, just founded in North Scituate. In the interim between leaving Parsonsfield and assuming the Smithfield Seminary in 1840, he was pastor at Meredith Village. See: *Free Baptist Cyclopedia*, pp. 550-553.

²⁶ Greenville Baptist Church became somewhat disorganized and weakened during the interval from 1839 to 1843 when they had no settled minister; members drifted away and contact was lost with many others. Consequently, Rev. Quinby led the effort which produced a "renewed covenant" in 1843.

²⁷ Quinby subsequently served in churches in New Hampshire and Massachusetts before being principal of the Lebanon Academy from 1861 to 1864. In 1864 he ceased preaching entirely and became a partial invalid. In 1868 he became the chaplain at the New Hampshire State Prison, and after some further pastorates, he died in Milton Hills, NH, the site of his final church. See: *Free Baptist Cyclopedia*, p. 553.

buying it in 1875. He continued the Institute, largely at his own expense until the spring of 1879, when it was closed permanently.²⁸

When a meetinghouse was built in Greenville in 1822, it was erected by an entity called the "Baptist Society in Smithfield," which was a corporate body, not the church, made up originally only of men, which applied and received a charter in May 1822 from the General Assembly to own property and erect a meetinghouse.²⁹ Colonel Nathan B. Sprague (who donated most of the land for the meetinghouse) and Nicholas Steere Winsor were appointed by the Baptist Society as agents to secure the charter. The Baptist Society clearly got the charter because they applied a number of times in subsequent years to *amend* the charter for various purposes.³⁰ The church obtained its own charter in 1864, and these two entities operated in parallel and conjunction until the end of the century.³¹

²⁸ Later uses of the campus included being the Pentecostal Collegiate Institute (1902-1919) and the Watchman Institute (1923-1974), an industrial training school and camp for African-Americans based on the model of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. In the 1920s and 1930s the buildings were vandalized (some fires set by local Ku Klux Klansmen in the 1920s), and the training school went bankrupt by 1938. It was then operated as a summer camp until 1974. In the 1970s an effort to restore the buildings succeeded, and it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. Since 1983 it has been the Scituate Commons, an apartment complex.

²⁹ All of this is found in the *Records of the Baptist Society in Smithfield*.

³⁰ *Records of the Baptist Society*, April 1839; April 25, 1840; Feb. 29, 1864. The Baptist Society had ceased by 1890. On June, 1882, the church voted to authorize the trustees to receive ownership of the meetinghouse pews from the Society, and by 1887 the Society had transferred all of the pews to the Church. By 1900 the trustees had taken over complete responsibility for the entire property. The minutes of the Society were recorded erratically (or meetings were rare) in the last half of the 19th century, and the record ended in 1890. There is a pew rent book that goes to 1905, but only twelve pews were being rented by then. The Society's charter of 1822 and the Church's charter of 1864 were both forgotten because the church voted in 1917 to apply to the General Assembly for a charter for the First Freewill Baptist Church in Smithfield only to be told that they already had one. See: *Church Records*: January 22, 1917; January 14, 1918.

³¹ Such an arrangement was quite common for churches. A corporate entity, called the "Society," owned the meetinghouse, while the unincorporated "Church" used and occupied the meetinghouse. Each entity had its own meetings and own officers, so that a dual-governance structure existed. The First Baptist Church in Providence was begun in 1638, but its present meetinghouse was erected in 1774-1775 by a corporation called the Charitable Baptist Society [which still exists]. In Chepachet, a group calling itself the Christian Benevolent Society, obtained a corporate charter in 1814, erected a meetinghouse in 1821, and changed their name to the Proprietors of the Chepachet Meeting House in January 1822. Then on May 7, 1822, the Chepachet church was organized as the Church of Christ in Gloucester. They would later call

The original minutes of the "Baptist Society in Smithfield" also specified how the meetinghouse was to be built, how it was to be used, how many pews, and so forth. One of the most interesting things was the stipulation that on the 1st and 3rd Sundays, Elder Joseph White, the settled minister of Greenville would preach. Then on the 2nd and 4th Sundays, "Elder Tobey" would preach in the morning, and that the Methodists then would have the use of the meetinghouse in the afternoon. If there was a 5th Sunday in the month, the General Six Principle Baptists could have it. One thing that I noticed in looking at all the historical accounts of your church is the fact of Elder Tobey's preaching on the 2nd and 4th Sundays was left out. Who was Elder Tobey?

"Elder Tobey" was Zalmon Tobey, a Freewill Baptist preacher too. [When I told Priscilla Holt, your church historian, who "Elder Tobey" actually was, she brought her copy of the Tobey family genealogy which has Zalmon Tobey in it.] This same Zalmon Tobey preached the dedication sermon when your meetinghouse was first opened. What this means is that the Freewill Baptists were preaching in the meetinghouse all four Sundays in 1822-1823. Zalmon Tobey is also the person who baptized Samuel Daily in North Providence. Tobey ceased preaching in Greenville when he became the pastor of the 4th Baptist Church in Providence in 1823, and nothing in the records says who, if anyone, took his place on 2nd and 4th Sunday mornings. It is highly likely that Reuben Allen preached on some of those Sundays since he was preaching in Chepachet and North Scituate in this same period and would become the settled minister at Greenville in 1829. A committee of the Baptist Society (the corporate entity) determined who could preach in the meetinghouse. The 1952 history of this church indicated that the Baptists

themselves the Chepachet Freewill Baptist Church. In the Chepachet case, the "Society" came before the organization of the "Church."

were preaching every Sunday by 1850, but the records show that they were preaching here every Sunday morning from the beginning.³²

The Freewill Baptists were the liberal Baptists in their day. (1) They practiced open communion, which means that they allowed other Christians to share the Lord's Supper with them. All other Baptists, whether Particular or General Six-Principle or 7th Day Baptists, practiced closed communion. The Particular Baptists and 7th Day Baptists would admit no one who had not been baptized by immersion. The General Six-Principle Baptists would not admit anyone who had not been immersed and had not undergone the laying on of hands. When they celebrated the Lord's Supper at Greenville in the beginning, the partakers crowded around the communion table. On one Sunday the number who gathered around the table numbered 120, and on another occasion the minutes recorded, "A Large number of the Brethren then surrounded their Father's table...."³³ They gathered around because they drank from a common communion cup which was passed to each person. (Individual communion cups did not come into use anywhere in the United States until the 1890s when it was finally realized that the common cup spread tuberculosis, among other diseases.)³⁴

(2) The Freewill Baptists were liberal in admitting Christians from other denominations to join without being re-baptized. The other varieties of Baptists required anyone coming from another tradition that had not been immersed to be re-baptized.

(3) The Freewill Baptists were liberal in dismissing and receiving members by letter of transfer to and from non-Baptist churches. The other kinds of Baptists would not

³² See: Lloyd P. Stevens, "A History of the First Freewill Baptist Church of Smithfield in Greenville, Rhode Island" (1952).

³³ *Church Records*, June 11, 1820; August 13, 1820; April 1, 1821; August 5, 1821.

³⁴ William Henry Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 66; J. Stanley Lemons, *FIRST: The First Baptist Church in America* (Providence: Charitable Baptist Society, 2001), 60.

grant letters to churches “not of the same order,” including other Baptist churches!³⁵ The regular (Calvinist) Baptists would not issue letters to Freewill Baptist churches.³⁶

(4) The Freewill Baptists licensed and ordained women; none of the others would do that. The General Six-Principle Baptists in the 1600s and 1700s had had “she preachers” and allowed women to speak and vote in church meetings, but these practices were eventually eliminated. The Particular Baptists, following the organizational ideas of John Calvin, would not allow women to have leadership roles, and regarded “she preachers” and women speaking and voting to be disgraceful and un-Scriptural.

The Particular Baptist churches in the major towns, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Newport, began an effort in the mid-1700s to upgrade the status of Baptists in the eyes of the other denominations: the Anglicans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Dutch Reformed, all of whom required educated ministers and strictly limited the role of women. That meant developing an educated ministry, creating a college, paying the clergy, dignifying the worship services, and getting rid of women’s voice and votes in the church meetings. My church, the First Baptist Church in America, underwent this process from 1770 to 1795 and sloughed off its General Six-Principle skin and emerged as a Particular Baptist church holding the whole bag of Calvinist ideas about predestination and limited atonement, with the president of the first Baptist college as its minister, wearing a robe and powdered wig, preaching in the most magnificent Baptist meetinghouse in the country, and women having no voice or vote in the meetings.

³⁵ As the sharp edges of sectarianism smoothed, this practice softened and eventually changed. For example, as of 1821 the 1st Baptist Church in America started to grant a “certificate of good standing” to persons going to non-baptizing churches, a practice that continued until 1914, after which it issued letters of transfer to such churches.

³⁶ For example, the 1st Baptist Church of Westerly refused to grant letters to Calvary Baptist Church of Westerly because Calvary practiced “open communion.” See: *Records of the First Baptist Church of Westerly*, Vol. 2, December 29, 1870.

Compare this then, to the emerging Freewill Baptists who *did* license and ordain women preachers and evangelists, practiced open communion, and proclaimed that everyone had a chance at salvation. This produced the Greenville Baptist Church.

(5) The Freewill Baptists were not only liberal in their practices and polity, but in the causes they championed. Almost before any other denomination (certainly of the Baptists) they officially championed temperance and abolitionism – the greatest reform crusades of the pre-Civil War period.

Alcoholic consumption was a major problem in the United States in the early National Period, far worse than any level of consumption of alcohol today. America was a nation of whiskey and hard-cider drinkers.³⁷ By the 1820s local Freewill churches sought to restrict the use or sale of liquor near meetings or at funerals and the like. The Freewill Baptists fully identified themselves with the American Temperance Society, which was organized in Boston in 1826. *The Morning Star*, the denomination's newspaper, was pro-temperance right from its beginning in 1826. In 1828 Hosea Quinby [later the 3rd pastor at Greenville] introduced a resolution at the Freewill Baptist General Conference supporting the temperance movement, and it was adopted. In 1832 the General Conference adopted further resolutions denouncing the drinking at greater length.³⁸ This church had a Temperance Committee from at least 1873 until it was abolished in the by-laws revision in 1965 to create the Social Action Committee.³⁹

³⁷ See William J. Rorabaugh, *the Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

³⁸ See: *Free Baptist Cyclopedia*, pp. 638-639.

³⁹ Great gaps exist in the *Church Records* from 1847 to 1855 and again from 1856 to 1873. When the records resume, the church had an elaborate committee structure, including a Temperance Committee. It is interesting to see that by the early 1950s, the Temperance Committee had become the Temperance and Citizenship Committee. In 1965 it was replaced by the Social Action Committee.

Freewill Baptists in upper New England as early as 1834 were the first organizations in the country to endorse the idea of immediate emancipation. Then, the General Conference of the Freewill Baptists, meeting in Byron, NY in October 1835 adopted resolutions calling for immediate abolition. You need to remember that William Lloyd Garrison had only begun his crusade for immediate emancipation about four years earlier, and the American Anti-Slavery Society was started only in 1833. Abolitionism was a wholly radical idea and extremely unpopular even in the North in the 1830s, leading to anti-abolition riots, church burnings, and legislation being introduced in various states that sought to exclude abolitionist agents from speaking, including Rhode Island.

These reforms are explicitly part of the “renewed covenant” adopted by Greenville Baptist Church on July 15, 1843.⁴⁰ The rules included:

Rule 1

We will admit none to membership in the Church who make or sell ardent spirits as a drink or beverage or who use it themselves or furnish it for a like purpose.

Rule 2

Believing that the Bible teaches that slavery is a sin, consequently ought to be done away, we will not admit to our fellowship a slaveholder or one who apologizes for slavery.

Rule 3

Believing further that it will tend to the Glory of God & good of men, we will, as individuals exert our influence in all consistent ways for the promotion of temperance [,] Abolition[,], Missions[,], Moral Reform[,], Sabbath Schools & Education. Each member however being at liberty to pursue that method for the promoting of these benevolent enterprises which he feels that duty dictates[,], that we will have no trials with each other as to any difference of oppinion [sic] which may exist as to such methods.

⁴⁰ See: *Church Records*, April 15, June 17, and July 15, 1843.

Indeed, this is a clear statement, but, in fact, the Greenville Church experienced some controversy in the late 1830s over abolitionism. A lengthy set of resolutions was unanimously adopted on April 7, 1838 at the annual meeting of the Baptist Society (the corporate body which owned the meetinghouse and determined who could use it) reflecting their ire at an incident involving an abolitionist speaker. The speaker, Oliver Johnson, was thrown out of the meetinghouse when he tried to make his speech, and the principal agent of this expulsion was Col. Nathan B. Sprague, who had donated the land and had a front pew in the building. He was outraged at Oliver Johnson's position, and as "owner of the building," he got Johnson removed.

It is easy to know what Johnson said because he said it many times before, including a talk he gave at the Middlebury, VT Congregational Church, on February 18, 1835, where he declared: "Slavery is a moral evil—a sin—and cannot be continued for a moment without guilt." In other words, if you did not favor immediate emancipation, you were complicit in the moral evil of slavery. In 1837-1838 he was the Rhode Island State agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society, speaking all over the state. Colonel Sprague would have none of it and had him thrown out, and the Baptist Society in Smithfield unanimously approved of his action. So, while the renewed covenant of 1843 represented a step forward, you will note that Rule #3 says they will not argue about the means of ending slavery. Remember it stated, ". . . we will have no trials with each other as to any difference of oppinon [sic] which may exist as to such methods." No one was pro-slavery, but they disagreed about immediate or gradual emancipation.

As suggested by Rule 3 in the renewed covenant, many reforms were being promoted during those times. One hot issue of the 1820s and 1830s had been the Anti-

Masonic movement. This movement had begun in upstate New York and Vermont in the 1790s and held that the Masons were a secret, aristocratic conspiracy trying to control the government and spreading atheism and anarchy.⁴¹ The Anti-Masonic movement gained many adherents, especially among the rural Baptists, Methodists, and other evangelical groups and blossomed into a potent political movement in the 1820s and 1830s, even running a candidate for President in 1828 and 1832. The Anti-Masonic fervor caused division within the Greenville Baptist Church, so much so that Reuben Allen, the pastor, moved “that the Subject of Masonry nor anti Masonry have no place for discussion in this Church. . . .” One of the brethren “was very much opposed to this motion,” but a vote was taken on the motion and it “carried, none voting in the negative.”⁴² Such a discussion would have to stay “out of doors” and not in the church. Anyone who failed to observe this decision could be subject to the discipline of the church, most likely charged with “disorderly walking.”

It is interesting to me to study the efforts of the early churches to discipline their members. Back before the Civil War, churches commonly punished individuals who violated the church’s sense of proper behavior in church and in the community. Misbehaving out in the world was seen as injuring the cause of Christ and was subject to church discipline. I have examined the early records of a number of Rhode Island churches, but your disciplinary records are pretty bland and generally uninteresting. In

⁴¹ Of course, the Masons were a secret society and tended to consist of the “better sort” in society who were prominent in business and government, but the other charges were nonsense. Among the Founding Fathers, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Nathanael Greene, James Varnum, William Ellery, and John Hancock were prominent Masons. The idea that the Masons were spreading atheism and anarchy came from the belief that the French Revolution and all of its excesses and horrors were caused by Masons. Such crackpot ideas are still rife on the Internet and elsewhere by people who link the Masons, the Jews [See: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*], the Illuminati, Marxists, the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations, and other international organizations in a world conspiracy.

⁴² *Church Records*, September 17, 1831.

the records of the First Baptist Church in America one finds people being expelled for fighting, drinking, counterfeiting, “brawling in a tavern,” fornication, adultery, swearing, “engaging in Sodomical practices,” lying, stealing, back-biting, attending the theater, “behaving in a scandalous and reproachful manner,” “bedding and boarding a certain man and drinking to excess,” “having a criminal conversation with a woman,” “associating with a girl of disreputable character and remaining with her one night in a house of ill fame on the road to Pawtucket,” and so forth.

Greenville’s disciplinary records are much less colorful as nearly every person was excluded for “unchristian-like behavior,” if a cause was stated at all. The first exclusion from Greenville Baptist occurred a year after the church was first gathered. A committee investigated an unspecified complaint against Lydia Smith which resulted in her being “disowned” in June 1821 at a special meeting at the pastor’s home.⁴³ Eleazer Hawkins was one the church’s first deacons, elected at the organizational meeting on May 16, 1820, but the church disowned Deacon Hawkins on March 20, 1824—without any reason stated.⁴⁴ Only once did the records say of anyone, Pardon Hunt, that he was excluded for “adultery and fornication.”⁴⁵ Rhoda Burlingame was disowned for having “wounded the cause of the Redeemer [and] had done many things out of the way which Decency forbids here mentioning.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Clemens Smith was disowned because “he had used very violent expressions, that was far beneath the dignity, not only of Christians but all human beings....”⁴⁷ Charlotte Sheldon was excluded upon a motion which declared that “in keeping company with so many young men[,] going into rude

⁴³ *Church Records*, June 30, 1821.

⁴⁴ *Church Records*, April 16, 1820, March 20, 1824.

⁴⁵ *Church Records*, October 20, 1827.

⁴⁶ *Church Records*, June 30, 1821.

⁴⁷ *Church Records*, December 14, 1828.

character so that she ought to be set aside from the church as a disorderly walker.”⁴⁸

One of the more interesting cases involved the “unchristian conduct” of Joseph Chace. He declared in a church meeting “that the Churches in connection with this were churches of the Devil & warning young converts not to connect with any church....” He had been brought before the church meeting in the first place because he charged “that the Churches were dripping with blood & that they would lie to get members into the Church & then lie to keep them in.”⁴⁹ Unrepentant, he was excluded.

The last exclusion in the 19th century came in 1881 when “it was voted that Bro. Martin Mann be dropped from the roll of church membership for what to the church seemed good and sufficient reasons.”⁵⁰ Perhaps some exclusions “for cause” have occurred since then, but the clerk’s minutes (many of which were missing or spotty) did not show any. Instead, one only finds the church membership lists being pruned from time to time to eliminate people who no longer attend.

One thing that I always try to learn is where women fit into the church. Since the 1600s women have constituted about 2/3 of all the members of all Protestant churches, but rarely have they been allowed to lead. Even among the Freewill Baptists, while women were licensed as preachers and evangelists, their number was quite small.⁵¹ In Greenville Baptist women spoke and voted in meetings all the time, but you discover odd and interesting entries in the minutes which show that the men ruled; for example, on May 14, 1836, the minutes stated: “...as there was not male Members enough to do

⁴⁸ *Church Records*, March 15, 1845.

⁴⁹ *Church Records*, April 16, 1842.

⁵⁰ *Church Records*, Vol. II., March 31, 1881.

⁵¹ See footnote #8.

business we spent the time in Conference and it was a Precious Season for our Souls.” Then they voted on December 15, 1838 to require at least five male members to transact all church business.⁵² And, as noted above, the Baptist Society was constituted entirely of men for many years, and the Society owned the property and meetinghouse.

I look to see women’s position in places of authority, such as the Deacons and Trustees, Moderator, members of the Standing Committee. Well, there are none on the Standing Committee (which was the executive committee of the church) until 1880 when they added two elderly women to the committee composed of the pastor and deacons (all men). The first woman Clerk was Miss Emeline Mowry, elected January 1903, but of course, by the early 20th century, the concept of a clerk had been largely transformed in the public’s mind from a man to a woman. Clerks and secretaries in the mid-19th century had been nearly all men, but by the end of the century, these had become women’s jobs. How many of you have been on a committee, and everyone (especially the men) expected a woman to be the committee secretary? No women served on the Board of Trustees until January 1905, when Mrs. Frank Gavitt took the place of the deceased William Winsor. The first woman Treasurer was Elizabeth W. Vaughn, elected January 1929.

There were no women deacons until the by-laws were revised in 1965. The church had adopted the idea of “deaconesses” probably in the early 1950s, but these were not deacons. They were the housekeeping helpers of the male deacons, washing communion cups and taking care of the communion table linen and such. Then in 1965, the church created the Diaconate, but stipulated that it would consist of nine men and six women. (Can’t let the women get control yet!) But it is interesting to note that Carla Gardner was elected as the first woman chair in 1979, and by 1983 a majority of the

⁵² *Church Records*, Vol. I, May 14, 1836; December 15, 1838.

members of the Diaconate were women despite what the by-laws said. Finally, a further by-law revision in 1985 removed the gender specifications, and women had been in the majority ever since.

At nearly the same time, the first woman Moderator, Ethel Stickney took office in 1978, and that was the same year when the first woman since Clarissa Danforth in 1821 preached at Greenville Baptist Church. Some 157 years after Sister Danforth, Kate Penfield preached on August 6 and August 13, 1978. In addition, Kate Penfield was the first woman ordained by this church, this occurring on February 22, 1981.⁵³ Helen Louise Bowser served as an interim minister in 1984 and 1985, and then you called your first female settled minister in Lynn Holden in 1989. Now, you have another woman minister, Wendy Kiefer-O'Brien.

It seems fitting that you now have a female minister who is preaching a revival in this old church. It is a return to the quarry from which you were digged since this church which had its beginning as a result of the preaching of a woman. Let me quote again from the old minutes which described Clarissa Danforth as "the most remarkable female that ever was raised up in these parts that we have any account [of]." Well, Wendy Kiefer-O'Brien regards preaching as her "strongest spiritual gift." Missions and evangelism are high on her list of priorities as she reaches out to embrace the people of this area. Perhaps in the future when the history of this time is written at another anniversary, the writer will say of Wendy Kiefer-O'Brien, as they did of Clarissa Danforth, "...she is one that is called and Sent forth of God to Preach the everlasting Gospel of Christ....Curiosity Led

⁵³ Carole "Kate" Harvey Penfield went on to greater things, becoming the associate (1981-1985) and co-pastor (1985-1987) of Central Baptist Church in Providence and then co-pastor of the 1st Baptist Church in America (1987-1995). She was national vice-president of the American Baptist Churches of the USA (1993-1995) and resigned from 1st Baptist to become the executive director of the Ministers Council of ABC/USA.

many to go and hear what the female Stranger had to say and many Dated their Conviction from the time they first heard her preach....”