
Behold, the Stone!

John Byington and the Beginnings of SDA Education

By Jill Reynolds

And Joshua . . . took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall therefore be a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God (Joshua 24:26, 27).

As long ago as Biblical times, it was a custom to erect a stone to commemorate special events and places. We follow the same practices today as evidenced by tombstones in our cemeteries, markers on our battle sites, and statues of famous men.

Following this same practice, Seventh-day Adventists erected such a stone in Bucks Bridge, New York, in 1978. The monument is not significant to church members alone. It stands as a witness to all the events that occurred there more than a century before, and the people who made them happen. John Byington was one of these.

He was born in Hinesburg, Vermont, in 1798, the sixth of 10 children. His father, Justus Byington,

This article, somewhat abridged here, won the 1984 Governor's Trophy Research Contest, Senior Division, for Ms. Reynolds, who was then in grade 10 at Gouverneur Junior/Senior High School in Gouverneur, New York.

was a Revolutionary War veteran and a prominent traveling Methodist preacher who pastored several congregations in Vermont and northern New York state. He also served as a delegate to the convention that organized the American Methodist Church.

John traveled with his family during his early childhood and received little, if any, formal education. He was converted during a camp meeting at the age of 18, after which he conducted family worship during his father's absence. However, at the age of 21, John fell into deep depres-

sion and was in poor health for more than three years. After much prayer, his health was restored and he left home, spending some time working on a fishing boat. No doubt this change of environment also helped improve his health.

John was wed to Mary Priscilla Ferris in 1827. Shortly after the birth of their first child, Mary passed away leaving John to care for his infant daughter, Caroline.

In 1828, John, along with parents and family, moved to Bucks Bridge, New York, a prosperous mill town along the Grasse River. John lived and worked on a small farm while his father, now semiretired, lived nearby. John remarried in 1830 to Catherine Newton.

A majority of the Bucks Bridge population were Methodists. They had to attend church services elsewhere because they had no local meetinghouse. Therefore in 1834, the people banded together and gathered stones from their pastures to build a foundation for a new Methodist Episcopal church and parsonage. John Byington, respected in the community for his diligence, was placed in charge of construction. Three years later the neat white structure was completed. John occasionally preached in the new church, as he was a licensed exhor-

ter. (An exhorter was a layman who conducted prayer meetings and encouraged the laity in spiritual matters.)

In 1841, slavery became a controversial issue in the area. John was sympathetic with the Negro slaves, and some sources state that his home was a station on the underground railroad to Canada.¹ The fact that he named one of his sons after William Wilberforce, a great English emancipationist, shows his support for abolition.² Members of the Methodist church felt that his participation in this activity was wrong. So rather than cause a division in the congregation, John and several of his friends left the Methodist Church to worship in the village of Morley, two miles up the Grasse River. In 1843, the First Wesleyan Methodist Society was incorporated in Morley, a denomination that strongly supported the antislavery movement. John Byington then began building his second church, where he served as a licensed minister for two years.

During one revival service John was reproached about his tea drinking and use of tobacco. He gave the matter serious consideration and entered into strict health reform. It is reported that he noticed an immediate improvement in his health.³

In 1852, a copy of *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* was given to him by H. W. Lawrence, an Adventist layman. Having been a devout Wesleyan for almost ten years, John received it with opposition. After reviewing the scripture texts presented in the article, however, he became convinced that Saturday, rather than Sunday, was the Sabbath. This threw him into deep perplexity. How could he keep the seventh day as the Sabbath when he had already established two churches that upheld Sunday? His Wesleyan Methodist followers would be confused if he joined the

Adventists, an unpopular offshoot of the Millerites. John made no immediate decision on the subject, but prayed for God's guidance.

In February of 1852, tragedy struck the Byington family. A deadly epidemic surged through the area. Within six weeks, two of his beloved daughters, Laura, who was 21, and Theresa, 15, had died. They were buried in the tiny Bucks Bridge cemetery beneath a stone with the inscription: "They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their deaths they were not divided."⁴

At their Sabbath day burial, it seemed to John that he heard a voice saying, "The *seventh day* is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God." John responded in prayer, "O God, if I live until next Saturday, I will keep it!" And he did.⁵

Records show that John Byington's name was soon dropped from the Wesleyan Methodist church's roll. He, his wife, and two older children were baptized in the Grasse River in July, 1752. He then began an in-depth study of the doctrine of his new faith, leading others to accept Adventism because of his persuasion.

Services began to be held in the homes of the believers. The small congregation soon decided that their children should receive a special education in their own school. In the following account, John Byington addressed his partners in the faith, Aaron and Henry Hilliard, about the matter.

John said, "I'll give my daughter Martha to teach such a home-school. What will you give, Brother Hilliard?"

The strong-minded Irishman didn't flinch as he gave his reply—one that didn't seem in the least to tax *his* holiness. "Brother Byington, I'll give the parlor of my home for such a school."

"And I'll make the necessary seats and the benches," added Henry, Aaron's older brother.⁶

So began the first Seventh-day Adventist school in America in the

year 1853. Martha Byington's school register read as follows:

Cynthia, Seymour, Sydney, Eddie Hilliard (Aaron's)
Clark, Cyprus, Parmelia Hilliard (Henry's)
John, Orange, Ellen, Ruth Penoyer
Isabella, Samuel, Catherine, Julia, Henry Crosbie
Frank Humphrey Peck⁷

The objectives of the Adventist home-school were different from those of regular schools. The building of character was of foremost concern. The Bible was the basis of the curriculum. Emphasis was placed on labor skills and missionary work.

The effects of that first Adventist home-school were felt throughout the world. Out of the 17 pupils enrolled, two became overseas missionaries. Eddie Hilliard worked for 15 years in Australia and eight years in India before he died. Parmelia Hilliard worked with her husband in the British Isles, where they established Seventh-day Adventist churches.

John Byington pastored the believers in various homes for three years. In 1855, however, the congregation grew too large for home accommodations. The construction of John Byington's third church began in the fall of 1855, directly across the road from the Methodist church that he had also helped to build. It was

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ests or planning for a specific occupation. Rather they should expand their concepts, explore different work tasks, and ask many questions of themselves and others. Such activities can help students develop positive attitudes toward work and assure that they will have pleasant work experiences in later life. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Stanley B. Baker and Cynthia Lausberg Popowicz, "Meta-Analysis as a Strategy for Evaluating Effects on Career Education Interventions," *The Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, 31:3 (March, 1983), pp. 178-186.

² Some of the career education activities are modifications of ideas presented by Robert Sylvester and Esther Mathews, "Four Big Questions Children Need to Ask, and Ask, and Ask," from *Career Education: A Lifetime Process*, Jack W. Fuller and Terry O. Whealon, eds. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978), pp.109-122.

³ John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982).

⁴ Wellford Wilms, "Vocational Education and Job Success: The Employer's View," *Phi Delta Kappan* (January, 1984), pp. 347-350.

Byington. He was buried in Battle Creek in 1887, at the age of 89.

The home where Martha Byington taught school no longer exists, but her influence lives on. Martha, who outlived all of her students by reaching the age of 103, started what now constitutes the largest parochial school system in the world.¹⁰

On September 17, 1978, a dedicatory service was held to commemorate Seventh-day Adventist roots in Bucks Bridge. Many people—some with religious connections and others with historical interest—attended the ceremony. Of course, the highlight was the unveiling of the new granite monument placed on the site where the foundation stones of the old structure remain.

The Bucks Bridge monument stands for more than just a church

and a small home school. It signifies a tiny, unknown community making its mark on the world, and the influence of a man who stood by his convictions in spite of the opinions of others. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Lillian Adams, "Behold, the Stone!" *The Quarterly*, St. Lawrence County (New York) Historical Association (October, 1970), p. 11.

² John O. Waller, "John Byington of Bucks Bridge—The Pre-Adventist Years." Andrews University, 1978, p. 8.

³ Adams.

⁴ Waller, p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "The Church Is Organized," *The Story of Our Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1956), p. 216.

⁹ Interview, Charles Darling, Bucks Bridge, New York, March 3, 1984.

¹⁰ Interview, Donald E. Wright, Superintendent of Education, New York Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Syracuse, New York, March 1, 1984.

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called the "House of Prayer" and was to be the first Seventh-day Adventist church building to be erected by the denomination.⁸

John preached to a congregation of 50 or more followers until 1858. At the request of his close friend, James White, he moved to Michigan with his family. For 15 years, he traveled throughout the state in a self-supporting ministry to boost the Adventist cause. In 1863, he became the first president of the newly formed Seventh-day Adventist Church's General Conference after James White declined to accept the position. John held the post for two years.

John Byington retired in Battle Creek, Michigan. In his later years, followers referred to him as Father

marking the 125th anniversary of the first SDA home school.