

Benjamin Taylor (1786-1848) a Jones/Smith Preacher in Antebellum Michigan

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My remarks focus on Benjamin Taylor (1786-1846) who was one of the early Michigan restorationists.¹ I don't know how to relate his efforts to later restorationist churches in the state, but some continuity is almost guaranteed. This earliest Michigan restorationist history—most of the decade of the 1830s—remains to be explored. Identifying ties with later Stone-Campbell Michigan churches is possible, I am convinced, because of the several journals published by the leaders of the Abner Jones/Elias Smith movement of which Taylor was a part and by leaders of the Stone-Campbell movement.

Taylor was born in Beverly, Massachusetts, twenty miles northeast of Boston into a family of Baptists.² Somewhat later they moved to New Hampshire and then to Salem, Massachusetts, where they became members of the Christian church founded just a few years before. Abner Jones preached for the Salem congregation at that time. Taylor responded to the Christian call in 1802 at a Freewill Baptist revival but did not become a member of that church.³ He went to sea at least twice making his last voyage to France. After a narrow escape he became more interested in religion and in 1809 became a member of the Salem church. Taylor preached at various places in southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In the spring of 1831 he made a short trip to Illinois and Michigan. His family, now with 6 children, moved that fall to the St. Joseph, Michigan, region, but ended up mostly residing in Kalamazoo County. He was appointed by the Michigan Christian Conference on several occasions to travel throughout the settled parts of the state to encourage, evangelize and plant churches.⁴ After about ten years in Michigan he moved to Rhode Island in the fall of 1841. In 1848 because most of his immediate family and two of his brothers had remained in Michigan, he decided to move back, but 8 weeks after his return he died September 24, 1848, in Schoolcraft, Michigan, just south of Kalamazoo. His brother John Taylor was the minister of the Christian Church located there.

I think it now important that we discuss the backdrop for Taylor's Michigan ministry. The earliest restorationists in Michigan were from the New England Abner Jones/Elias Smith movement. People from this movement were also the earliest restorationists in Ontario also unless one commences with Baptists who immigrated from the British Isles. Jones established the first congregation of Christians only in Lyndon, Vermont, in 1801. By 1804 Elias Smith had joined forces with him and brought along his Baptist congregation in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.⁵ In 1804 Jones established a congregation in Boston. After 1810 people from upper New England commenced

¹ The earliest Jones/Smith church in Michigan may have been in Saline, just south of Ann Arbor. *The Christian Herald*, September 21, 1848, 1.

² E. Edmunds, *Memoir Elder Benjamin Taylor, A Minister of the Christian Connexion, and Pastor of the Bethel Church in Providence, R. I.* (Boston: George W. White Printer, 1850) 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵ Thomas H. Olbricht, "Christian Connexion and Unitarian Relations, 1800-1844," *Restoration Quarterly* 9:3 (1966).

migrating westward into upper New York State and among them were several persons from the Jones/Smith movement.⁶ By 1820 the predominate number of Jones/Smith congregations were located along the Mohawk River valley and farther west in the Finger Lake Region. Robert Foster's, *The Christian Register and Almanack* for 1823 (pp. 35-45) lists the following number of ministers for the various states, ordained and unordained, but the majority ordained: PA 1, CT 17, MA 9, NY (E) 31, (W) 46, VT 40, NH 21, ME 15, RI 1.

By this time too persons from the movement had entered Ontario chiefly through Buffalo. Joseph Badger, the most important second generation leader, was born in Gilmanton, NH in 1792.⁷ After his conversion about 1810 Badger spent a few years preaching in Ontario. In 1818 Badger moved south of Rochester, New York. In 1825 and again in 1826, Badger visited the Stone movement Christian churches in Ohio and Kentucky. Elmer S. Stanton in his essay "The Contribution of Two Christian Connection Preachers to Disciples History in Canada: McIntyre and Ash," gives evidence for E. T. McIntyre being in Canada as early as 1820, and Joseph Ash in the early 1830s.⁸ Though these men had contact with Stone and his *Christian Messenger*, Stanton seems unaware that these leaders were from the Jones/Smith movement. According to Reuben Butchart, in 1832 there were twenty Christian Connexion Churches and twenty ordained elders, that is, preachers in Ontario.⁹ Joseph Badger had few good words to say about Alexander Campbell.¹⁰ The main issue for Badger was experiential conversion which he understood Campbell to deny. He likewise was not impressed with the need to take communion weekly. He also was much more favorable to Associations and Association ordaining of ministers than were Campbell/Scott.

The opening of the Erie Canal encouraged increasing population shifts westward the first segment opening in 1819 with the canal completed by 1825. The earliest settlers commenced populating the Western Reserve of Ohio. The Christian Connexion adherents and ministers arrived in Michigan a few years afterward because Michigan itself was settled later. Michigan had French settlements as early as the 1660s, but English settlement chiefly commenced after 1796 when the United States took over from Great Britain. The Michigan Territory was organized in 1805.¹¹ In 1819 six million acres in central and southern Michigan were acquired by the Treaty of Saginaw from the Objive, Ottawa and Potawatami Indian tribes, including all the lands south of the Grand River which ran through Lansing, Ionia, and Grand Rapids. That same year the first protestant church was founded in Michigan, the Methodist Episcopal Church in River Rouge. In 1820 the non native population of Michigan was 8,096. In contrast Ohio had 230,760 residents. In 1837 Michigan was admitted as a free state to the union. My home state of Missouri was admitted almost twenty years earlier in 1820. By 1850 the

⁶ Thomas H. Olbricht, "Christian Churches (Campbellite Tradition in the State of New York)," *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

⁷ Edmund G. Holland, *Memoir of Rev. Joseph Badger* (New York: C. S. Francis and Co., 1854).

⁸ Elmer S. Stanton, "The Contribution of Two Christian Connection Preachers to Disciples History in Canada: McIntyre and Ash," *The Campbell-Stone Movement in Ontario*, ed. Claude E. Cox (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995) 89-100.

⁹ Reuben Butchart, *The Disciples of Christ in Canada Since 1830* (Toronto: Disciples Publications, 1949) 9.

¹⁰ Barton W. Stone, *Christian Messenger*, VI (1832) 198. See also Joseph Badger, *Christian Palladium*, VI (1837) 25.

¹¹ See <http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/michhis.html>

population of Michigan was 397,654, and in 1860, 749,113. So indeed Michigan was settled rapidly, and Benjamin Taylor essentially got in on the ground floor.

Taylor was ordained in Freetown, Massachusetts, a Jones/Smith stronghold, in 1811, at which time Abner Jones preached the ordination sermon. The following report appeared in the 1811 *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (p. 310) the paper started by Elias Smith in 1808.

Certificate

To all whom it may concern,—this is to Certify that BENJAMIN TAYLOR, formerly of Salem, (Mass.) and a member of the Church of Christ in that place, was regularly ordained according to New Testament order, on the 16th of June, 1811, by those whose names are underwritten,—and we commend him unto all the churches of Christ where ever he may be called, as an able Minister of the New Testament; not of the Letter, but of the Spirit.

Signed by us, this 17th day of June, 1811.
Freetown, Massachusetts

Daniel Hix,
Philip Hatheway, 2d,
Abner Jones,
Douglas Farnum,
Frederick Plummer,
Ira Phillips,
Ebenezer Easty,
Zephaniah Crosman.

Daniel Hix was the preacher for a large Baptist congregation of about 300 members in Dartmouth, MA, who in 1807 decided to cast his lot with Jones and Smith and the church went with him.¹² Hatheway was a second generation leader in southeastern Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island. He had preached for a large Baptist church in Assonet, MA and both he and the congregation aligned themselves with the Jones/Smith movement.¹³ Frederick Plummer was an early publisher in the movement who mostly lived in New England, but for a time in Philadelphia. Taylor now traveled throughout the region preaching in evangelistic meetings and especially at New Bedford, MA.¹⁴ In 1812 he married Mary Rodman, the widow of a sea captain, and a member of the Free Baptist Church of Newport, RI.¹⁵ In the 1820s he preached mostly in Swansea, MA.

Most ministers from the Jones/Smith movement related amicably to persons of other churches, though they were sometimes criticized for being heretical. Edmunds writes of Taylor in the biography,

He also lived on very friendly terms with other religious societies, without respect to persons or sects. He exchanged pulpit services with the Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and Unitarians. He once was

¹² Thomas H. Olbricht, "Christian Connection", *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster, et. al., (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004) 190-191.

¹³ E. Edmunds, *Memoir Elder Benjamin Taylor*, 25,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26-28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

invited to preach a funeral sermon in a Quaker (Friends') meeting house in Somerset.¹⁶

For a year prior to moving to Michigan Taylor preached for the Christian Church in Fall River, a larger town near Swansea.

A description of the move of the Taylor to Michigan was one repeated by many another family migrating to the west at that time.

Accordingly, on the 16th of August, 1831, he left Swansea for the far West, as it was then called, the territory of Michigan. A long and tedious journey lay before them. They went by packet to New York, thence to Albany, and to Buffalo, by the great western canal. To Detroit by steamboat, and to the interior by wagons. After a journey of one month and two days, they reached that section of country called St. Joseph's, in the western part of Michigan; a rich and fertile country, watered with brooks and fine rivers, and covered with wide-spreading prairies. There were then but few white inhabitants in that section, and those were scattered over a wide extent of country. There were, however, many Indians, and those of a friendly and pacific character, except when under the influence of intoxicating drinks.

Elder Taylor's family were surrounded by the Pottawatamy Tribe. The old Chief, Sagamaw, and the young chief Shornoble, were kindly disposed, and often called to see their new neighbors.¹⁷

By 1835 notices appear of a conference of the Christian Churches in Michigan. An early conference was held in Jacksonburg (now Jackson). Some people from outside the state also apparently attended since Taylor's biographer Edmunds was there.¹⁸ A notice of the conference appeared in a new journal published by the Jones/Smith people in Exeter, New Hampshire, *The Christian Journal*, first issue, April 2, 1835.¹⁹ Under the title Michigan Christian Conference was reported,

This conference which has been but a short time in existence, appears to be in a flourishing condition. There is much country for them to possess, and we have no doubt the blessing of God will yet raise up the scattered few, and make them strong and many. Elder B. Taylor and J. Walworth have been appointed by that conference to travel among the churches until their next annual conference.²⁰

In a Conference at Jackson May 30, 1835, Taylor was added to conference membership and three other person were mentioned: John Walworth, John Cannon, and P. C. Manchester.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁹ Details concerning the journal are found in *The Centennial of Religious Journalism "Thy Kingdom Come"*, ed. J. Pressley Barrett, 2nd edition (Dayton, Ohio: Christian Publishing Association, 1908) 53-60. Elijah Shaw, a well known second generation Jones/Smith preacher, was the editor.

²⁰ *The Christian Journal*, July 23, 1835, p. 1. I am indebted to Michael Christie of Sheet Harbour, Nova Scotia for providing copies of items in this journal relating to Taylor in Michigan. Christie, a M.D. and Roland McCormick, a Baptist minister, also of Nova Scotia have been gathering all sorts of data regarding Baptists and more recently persons from the Jones/Smith movement in Nova Scotia. They have assembled the best collection of primary sources in this regard of anyone or library I know of.

Another conference was held October 5, 1835 at Spring Arbor southwest of Jackson. This conference was interestingly also reported in Barton W. Stone's *Christian Messenger* and some historians have presumed that these were Stone Christians. It is almost certain that the preachers were from the Jones/Smith movement, since a similar report may be found in *The Christian Journal*, and *The Christian Palladium*.²¹

Minutes of second annual Michigan Christian Conference at Spring arbor, on 3rd and 5th days of Oct. 1835. Elder Benjamin Taylor chosen moderator and William Smith, clerk. Elder James Knight received into conference membership. Elder Jesse E. Church of Erie Conference was present. Bro. Jno. S. Moor, member of church at Ypsilanti was ordained to the work of the ministry. Bro. Francis H. Adams, member of church at Salem, ordained to work of evangelist. Preachers of good report belonging to this conference: Benjamin Taylor of Prairie Ronde, Kalimazo Co.; John Walworth of York, Washtenaw co; John Cannon of Royal Oak, Oakland co; Joseph H. Smith of Jacksonburg, Jackson co; Philip C. Manchester of Hillsdale co.; James Knight of Spring arbor, Jackson co; John S. Moor of Ypsilanti; Francis H. Adams, itinerant. Unordained: Amos Freeman, itinerant. Received bro. Hiram S. Case as member of this conference.²²

Notice that the numbers present has now doubled and these men come from places from east to west in the southern part of the state. Benjamin Taylor at this time lives in Prairie Ronde in Kalamazoo County.

The Jones/Smith preachers came in contact with the Stone-Campbell preachers and some from the Jones/Smith churches became members of the Stone-Campbell churches in areas to which both had migrated. The three Christian Churches, that is, the O'Kelly Christians, the Jones/Smith Christians and the Stone Christians, considered themselves one, but it was not until into the 1840s that conferences were more than regional. Persons from the other groups were welcome to visit conferences in the other regions but it was uncommon that many did so. As was the case with among the Stone and Campbell reformers certain leaders always questioned the validity of the conferences, but conferences persisted from the first. A new emphasis was placed upon them among the Jones/Smith people after Elias Smith departed for the Universalists in 1817.²³

About these conferences David Millard wrote in 1848,
In the Christian Connexion, churches are independent bodies, authorized to govern themselves and transact their own affairs. They have a large number of associations called Conferences. Each conference meets annually, sometimes oftener, and is composed of ministers and messengers from churches within its bounds. At such conferences candidates for the ministry are examined, received and commended. Once a year, in conference, the character and standing of each minister is examined, that purity in the ministry may be carefully maintained. Such

²¹ *Ibid.*, December 24, 1835, p. 1. The heading states: "From the Christian Palladium".

²² *The Christian Messenger*, 9, Jan. 1835-Dec. 1835.

²³ Thomas H. Olbricht, "Christian Connection," 168-169. I also addressed this question in Thomas H. Olbricht, "Rallied Under the Standard of Heaven", *Discipliana*, Fall 2005, 115-118.

other subjects are discussed and measures adopted, as have a direct bearing on the welfare of the body at large.²⁴ Earlier, however, the conferences mostly consisted of preaching and ordaining ministers. In 1836 Taylor reported that in Michigan “they have some good revivals, and a number of young men with promising gifts are raised up.”²⁵ In April 1837 (p. 1) a report was received from Sister Norris, wife of Mark Norris, Yipsilanti, supporting the efforts of *The Christian Journal*, which according to her had received opposition. She also enlists support for education and temperance (p. 2). The work in Michigan, however, did not prosper as well as the preachers hoped. John Taylor, Benjamin’s brother wrote to Edmunds,

My brother labored hard and patiently here for several years, but the country being new and sparsely settled, he, as well as myself, saw comparatively little accomplished to what we desired. We differed in our doctrinal views on religious subjects, but I do not know that we ever exchanged a word with unkind feelings during the time we resided together in this new country.²⁶

After Taylor returned to the east, his crowning success was founding a chapel for sailors in Providence, Rhode Island, called Bethel organized in May 1842.²⁷ Not only did the Chapel have a church, but also a Sunday School and helped with the founding of a marine hospital. They also promoted abstinence.²⁸ About Taylor work at the Bethel Chapel G. H. Kilton wrote in the *Christian Herald*,

It was at this time that the idea was conceived, and the plan laid, for the establishment of a Bethel in that city; and after a visit to his friends in Michigan, he returned and commence an enterprise, which was a most beautiful climax to his labours—his history—his life! Here, for seven years, he consecrated all for the benefit of all around him, but especially for that interesting, but long neglect class, the sons of the ocean. And what was most gratifying to his friends as well as himself, his labours were attended with great success. He gathered a large congregation, organized a church, and finally saw the establishment free from debt, which led him to say, “I have nothing more to do, but to visit my children and die.”²⁹

We now close with the question as to when the first people allied with Alexander Campbell came to Michigan. I thank Vernon Boyd for calling my attention to the efforts of James Secrest and Nathan J. Mitchell in Michigan in 1831 the same year that Taylor moved to the state. He wrote:

Nathan J. Mitchell and Elder John Secrest left Belmont County, Ohio and preached in several places in southwestern Michigan in the spring of 1831. Secrest wrote Walter Scott, "I have been engaged in a tour on the frontiers of Michigan, Indiana and Illinois; preaching once or twice per day, except

²⁴ David Millard, “History of the Christians, or Christian Connexion” *History of all the Religious Denominations in the United States*, John Winebrenner, ed. (Harrisburg, PA: John Winebrenner, 1848) 167.

²⁵ *The Christian Journal*, July 14, 1836.

²⁶ E. Edmunds, *Memoir Elder Benjamin Taylor*, 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82-85.

²⁹ G. W. Kilton, *Christian Herald*, December 28, 1848.

when in the wilderness where no inhabitants were, save the Indians. I immersed a number and formed them into Churches on the revealed plan."³⁰

Benjamin Taylor moved to Michigan that same year. I don't know if they may have met, but it is not so indicated in my sources.

John Secrest was clearly from a Stone background. He however, showed up at the Mahoning Baptist Association meeting in 1827 at which Walter Scott was appointed Evangelist.³¹ From then on or at least soon thereafter, he cast his lot with the Campbell/Scott people. The Mitchell family may have had some early Stone ties, but they clearly cast their lot with the Campbell/Scott people by 1830 or earlier. In 1832 Nathan Mitchell, on his way to Howard, PA, immersed Isaac Errett and his brother Russell. Mitchell moved to Howard because he married a woman who lived there and spent the rest of his life evangelizing in central Pennsylvania.³² One wonders about the outcome of the Secrest/Mitchell Michigan efforts. The Taylor materials of which I am aware do not mention work that may have come from Campbell/Scott quarters.

According to Garrison and DeGroot, sometime before 1840 John Martindale, Reuben Wilson and David D. Miller may have commenced preaching in southwest Michigan, but the first congregation organized in the state was Plum Street in Detroit in 1841 where Thomas Hawley from England labored.³³ It is known that William Hayden, the older brother of A. S. Hayden, evangelized in the state, but as to what years is uncertain. In his *The Early History of the Disciples of Christ on the Western Reserve* Hayden wrote concerning William,

Some of his most stirring and profitable tours were into Michigan and Wisconsin; so that from Syracuse to the Mississippi River, and from Canada to Virginia, he "fully preached the gospel of Christ."³⁴

It is also known that the later famous Isaac Errett spent 1856-1866 in Michigan after which time he commenced editing the newly launched *Christian Standard* in Cincinnati, Ohio. About Isaac Errett, John T. Brown wrote in his *Churches of Christ: A Historical, Biographical, and Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in the United States, Australasia, England and Canada*,

In 1856 he took the serious step of a removal to the frontier country of Michigan, with the purpose of founding, with others, a colony, and entering into the lumber business, and, at the same time, preaching the gospel in the State of Michigan. Ten years were spent in this State, although a large part of the time he was occupied as corresponding secretary of the American Christian Missionary Society. In 1862 he was

³⁰ Vernon Boyd, "The Beginnings of the Stone-Campbell Movement in Southern Michigan," Unpublished Paper, p. 5. The sources for this statement are: Nathan J. Mitchell, *Reminiscences and Incidents in the Life and Travels of a Pioneer Preacher of the "Ancient" Gospel* (Chase & Hall, Publishers, Cincinnati: 1877), pp. 89-90, and *The Evangelist*, Vol. 1 No. 10, Oct 1832, p. 238.

³¹ A. S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1875) 55.

Nathan J. Mitchell, "Letter," *Millennial Harbinger*, 1833, IV, 92.

³³ Winfred Ernest Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1948) 306.

³⁴ A. S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio* (Cincinnati: Chase & Hall, 1875) 180

called to Detroit, to serve the new church on Jefferson Avenue, organized by a number of brethren there, which he served for two years. At the end of this period he returned to Muir, Mich., where he remained until 1866, when he removed to Cleveland, Ohio, to join in founding and editing the *Christian Standard*, which proved to be his great life work. From this time on, the history of the *Standard* was very largely the history of Isaac Errett.³⁵

One of the early places where he preached was Ionia, Michigan, where my maternal grandmother, Myrtle Dunsmore Taylor was born in 1879 to Methodist parents. Her father was born in New York, but his parents moved to Michigan by the early 1850s. Her mother was born in Michigan.³⁶

We have therefore completed some initial search into the early history of restorationism in Michigan. An excellent undertaking for a master's thesis, and I think a viable one would be to pursue the manner in which persons from the Jones/Smith movement may have entered into the Stone-Campbell movement. Such would be possible I think through perusing the journals and biographies from both groups from 1808-1868.

³⁵ John T. Brown, *Churches of Christ: A Historical, Biographical, and Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in the United States, Australasia, England and Canada* (Louisville: John P. Morton, 1904) 424.

³⁶ My grandmother's grandparents were: Edmund David Dunsmore born Sept. 1810, Prescott, Ont. (On the St. Lawrence Seaway directly south of Ottawa), and died December 26, 1860 in Ionia, MI. and Belinda Mallory born March 20 1812, in New York and died March 20, 1874 Ionia, Michigan. Edmund's ancestors were royalists and moved to Canada during the Revolutionary War.