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Bowles, Charles (1761–1843)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

Charles Bowles, a prominent African American Baptist preacher in New England during the first half of the nineteenth century, reportedly proclaimed the Second Advent message near the end of his life (1843). He was born in Boston,

Massachusetts, in 1761. A biography of Bowles identifies his father as an African servant and his mother as a daughter of “the celebrated Col. Morgan,” an officer in the Rifle Corps of the American Revolutionary army. Bowles’s infancy was spent with his father, but in his childhood he was placed under the care of a Mr. Jones of Lunenburg, Massachusetts. When Jones died, twelve-year-old Charles Bowles was placed in the family of a Tory whom he disliked. At the age of fourteen, Bowles became the waiter to an officer in the colonial artillery.¹

Two years later, Bowles enlisted in the Continental Army, fighting for the independence of the American colonies. After the close of the Revolutionary war, and the disbanding of the army, young Bowles went to New Hampshire where he engaged in agricultural pursuits. Soon after, he married Mary Corliss, his cousin and a granddaughter of Colonel Morgan. Charles struggled against the conviction that he should submit his life to Christ and went to sea for three years to avoid religious teaching. When he returned, though, he was baptized into the Calvinistic Baptist Church, in Wentworth, New Hampshire.²

Soon thereafter, though, after prayerful study of Scripture, he changed to the Free Will Baptist Church then just springing into existence. It was in this church that, after much soul searching and many trials, he finally yielded to a sense of calling to ministry. Licensed by the Free Will Baptist Church, Bowles traveled from city to city preaching the gospel. Between 1808 and 1817, he labored in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, the state of Rhode Island, and Williamstown, Vermont, baptizing many people and organizing several churches.³ He was ordained to the ministry in 1816.⁴

In Hinesburg, Vermont, a mob, seeking to put an end to the large baptismal services he was conducting in a pond, threatened to throw Bowles into an adjoining pond. However, he preached with such power that some of his persecutors ended up being baptized in the service they had intended to break up.⁵ Bowles also encountered bitter opposition because of his color, and the fact that he was preaching to large white congregations as well as black congregations.⁶

The principle source of information on Bowles is the biography authored by fellow black minister and abolitionist John W. Lewis, published in 1852. Though Lewis was described as a “highly esteemed” Millerite preacher in the June 7, 1843, issue of the *Signs of the Times*,⁷ he makes no explicit mention in the biography of a connection with the Millerite movement on Bowles’s part. Instead, it was Adventist scholar Le Roy Froom who later asserted, “One of the unusual characters in the roster of Millerite preachers was a colored minister, Charles Bowles.” According to Froom, Bowles preached “the standard Millerite exposition of prophecy.”⁸

Despite deteriorating health and loss of sight, Father Bowles, as he was often called because of his venerable age, continued preaching until just over a month before his death on March 16, 1843, in Malone, New York, at age 82.⁹

SOURCES

Burgess, G. A. and J. T. Ward. *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia*. Chicago: The Woman’s Temperance Publication Association, 1889. Accessed December 9, 2019. <https://books.google.com/>.

Froom, Le Roy Edwin. *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 4. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954.

Lewis, John W. *The Life, Labors, and Travels of Elder Charles Bowles*. Watertown, MA: Ingalls and Stowell’s Steam Press, 1852. Accessed December 9, 2019. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/lewisjw/lewisjw.html>.

NOTES

1. John W. Lewis, *The Life, Labors, and Travels of Elder Charles Bowles* (Watertown, MA: Ingalls and Stowell’s Steam Press, 1852), 5, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/lewisjw/lewisjw.html>?
2. Lewis, 5-8.?
3. *Ibid.*, 10-15.?
4. G. A. Burgess and J. T. Ward, *Free Baptist Cyclopaedia* (Chicago: The Woman’s Temperance Publication Association, 1889), 63, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://books.google.com/>?
5. Lewis, 21-24.?
6. Lewis, 116-117.?
7. Cited in George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 118.?
8. Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1954), 705. Unfortunately, Froom did not cite any sources of his information on Bowles.?

9. [Ibid.; Lewis, 214-216.](#)

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