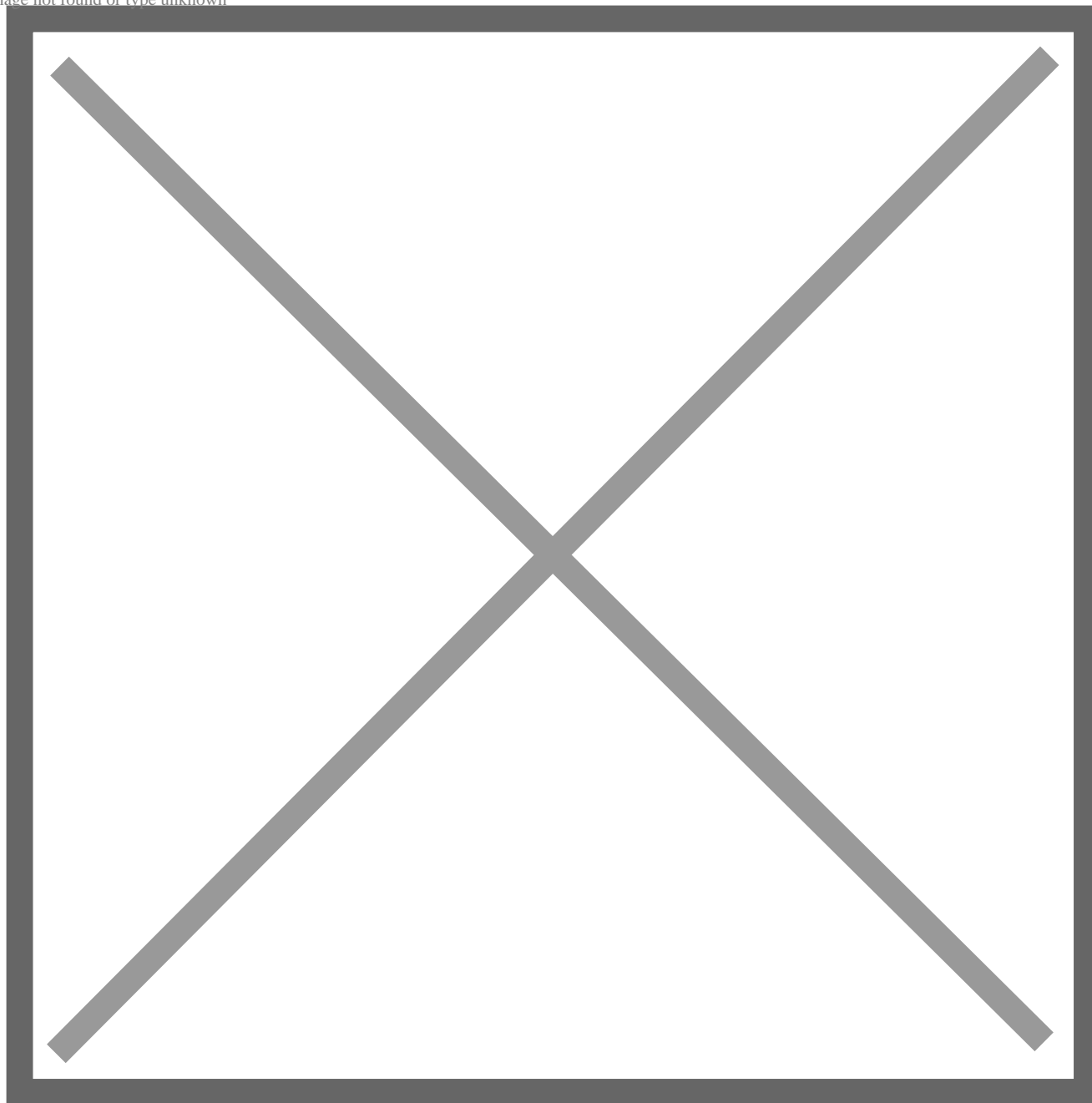


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Barr, Eri L. (1814–1864)

BENJAMIN BAKER

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Eri L. Barr was a Sabbatarian Adventist leader and minister and the first Seventh-day Adventist minister of color!

Early Life

Eri L. Barr was born on May 23, 1814, in Reading, Vermont.² His father William Barr was a free black, but Eri's maternity is unknown.³ Eri had two older brothers, Norman and William, Jr., who died before he was born, and a younger brother Horace (b. 1815). He also had three older sisters: Alva (b. 1804), Phebe (b. 1807), and Sebe (b. 1809).⁴ They are all recorded in the census as "colored," though in later records Eri would be listed as "Mulatto."⁵

As did many families in early nineteenth century America, the Barrs endured several untimely deaths. Eri not only lost his two older brothers, but his sisters Alva and Sebe died on the same day in 1823 while in their teens.⁶ If Eri did ever know his mother she was not present for most of his adolescence, as his father married a woman named Elmina Bixby in 1831.⁷ Eri's father would die sometime in the 1840s.

Eri Barr grew up in a town and state that had very few blacks. In fact, throughout his adolescent years the Barrs accounted for more than half of the black population of Reading.⁸ William Barr provided for his family as a mechanic, as would Eri before he became a minister. The family was likely Methodist.

In 1836 Eri Barr attended Wesleyan Academy, a prestigious preparatory school about 125 miles south of Reading in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, a small community bordering Springfield. Founded by Methodist ministers in 1817 in New Hampshire, Wesleyan offered a liberal arts curriculum and a completion certificate roughly equivalent to today's secondary school. From its inception the school accepted females and probably blacks. Barr had an option to study Classics or English and chose the latter, taking courses in speech, grammar, arithmetic, geography, and history. He roomed in the Seminary building on campus.⁹

Barr was at Wesleyan during a critical time in its history. The school year of 1836 witnessed one of Wesleyan's most remarkable revivals, with 100 students converted. The next year the school had its highest enrollment at 934, but subsequently saw that figure sharply decline due to the Panic of 1837, the emergence of rival institutions, and Horace Mann's public school system reorganization. Another factor was the intensifying national debate over slavery. Many of the students championed the abolitionist cause, to the dismay of school administrators, who wanted to stay quiet on the controversy to maintain patronage in the South. Perhaps inevitably for a Northern institution, Wesleyan did lose a number of its Southern benefactors.¹⁰ Barr attended Wesleyan for the entire school year of 1836.

After Wesleyan Barr returned to Reading and worked as a mechanic alongside his father and brother. He was married to Lori Z. Harvey (b. 1821), a white woman from nearby Woodstock, Vermont, by Methodist minister A.K. Howard on December 7, 1842.¹¹ The couple had one child, Emma, in 1844.

The year 1844 was pivotal for Barr, who was a firm believer in the doctrine of the imminent advent of Christ and was disappointed with tens of thousands of other Millerites when Jesus did not appear on October 22. Just over a month after the Great Disappointment on November 29, 1844, Barr wrote to the editor of the Millerite paper *The Voice of Truth* with an inspiring message for the disappointed: there "remains a little company whose trust is in the living God...that look to God and his word, whose faith grows stronger and stronger." In a nod to the previous time setting, Barr admitted "that I do not know the day nor the hour of my Lord's return, yet I am perfectly satisfied that God's elect will quickly be gathered."¹² Later in the March 11, 1846 issue of *The Voice of Truth* Barr wrote of "those isolated brothers and sisters" who "speak to each other through the Voice of Truth, as it appears to be the only way they can do it," who are clothed in "the spotless robe of waiting."¹³ It is not known if Barr was ever a Millerite minister, though he was active in witnessing to others.

The U.S. census of August 24, 1850, records the 36-year-old Barr as a mechanic, with a household in Goshen Gore (now Stannard), Vermont, that included his wife, daughter, mother-in-law, and younger brother Horace. The Barrs were the only blacks in the small community.¹⁴

Ministry

Eri Barr accepted the Sabbatarian Adventist message sometime before July 1, 1852, the date of his first letter in the *Review and Herald*.¹⁵ "I turn aside from the press of business, for a moment, to just say," Barr writes to editor James White, "that the cause of truth is moving onward in spite of all the powers of darkness combined."¹⁶ This indicates that Barr was engaging in ministry, although he was still practicing his trade to support his family. Barr would have been one of only a handful of Sabbatarians of color at the time, though in the subsequent years a number of prominent blacks would join the movement, including John West, Elias and Henrietta Platt, and William and Eliza Hardy.¹⁷

Barr's relationship with James and Ellen White was important to his ministry. The Whites first met Eri Barr in Wolcott, Vermont, on September 3, 1852, at a meeting in a 400-seat tent that adjoined the house of Seth Hubbell Peck. James White writes that here he and Ellen "met Brn. Barr and [Alfred S.] Hutchins for the first time, and heard them speak of their present faith, hopes and joys."¹⁸ James mentioned the meeting again in a retrospective piece titled "A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of Present Truth," remarking that he and Ellen first met "our much beloved Brn. Byington, Hutchins, and Barr, who continue firm friends of the cause and devoted laborers," while attending conferences "generally attended with great success."¹⁹ Later that month on the morning of September 30, Ellen White had a vision in Dorchester, Massachusetts, the contents of which James White adumbrated to Leonard Hastings in a letter. One of the takeaways of the vision was "that brethren Baker, Ingraham, Barr and Wheeler were men to be depended upon."²⁰ In June of the next year Barr reports meeting Robert and Eunice Harmon, Ellen's parents, in

Topsham, Maine, during an evangelistic tour of the state.²¹ In May 1857, the Whites attended a tent meeting that Barr was holding in Lancaster, Massachusetts. Although there is no extant correspondence of Ellen White to Barr, he was the subject of two more of her visions, to be remarked on below.

In the fall of 1852 Barr became a fulltime minister for the movement, joining one to two dozen other Sabbatarian ministers who supplemented their gospel peregrinations with a trade or farming and relied on fellow believers to provide them with food, lodging, and the occasional small donation. For the next eight years Barr would maintain a dizzying itinerary of pastoral work in dozens of towns and settlements in Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, with brief forays into Canada and Rhode Island. He would partner with eight Sabbatarian ministers, including Frederick Wheeler, Joseph Bates, and John N. Andrews.

Barr's modus operandi for his eight-year Adventist ministerial career mostly followed this pattern. He and his ministerial partner received a request from a Sabbatarian(s) to come do evangelism and/or provide pastoral services for Adventists in their vicinity. Sometimes Barr went to places of his own behest or were nearby his original destination; other times a leader such as James White or Joseph Bates asked him to visit. Barr spent anywhere from a couple of days to a month in a location. The Sabbatarians rented a hall or meetinghouse in the town, or erected a tent on a rented lot or coreligionist's property, to hold religious meetings. Townspeople were invited to the meetings via flyer, newspaper notice, and word-of-mouth. Barr and his partner would speak to the attendees on fundamental Christian doctrines, but mostly distinctive Adventist teachings, to which almost no Christians at the time adhered. These meetings were held on weekends or over the course of weeks, sometimes twice a day, or just in the evenings. Another facet of Barr's job in a given town was to develop evangelistic plans for the area, which he did in concert with local and regional Adventists. Fellow Sabbatarians provided Barr lodging, while he provided them spiritual direction, encouragement, counseling, and doctrinal instruction. Transportation for the peripatetic minister consisted of his feet, wagon, train, and occasionally boat. A financial system to salary ministers was not instituted until the tail-end of Barr's career, so he was mostly supported by moonlighting, selling literature, and the occasional donation from a Sabbatarian. This remuneration setup was notoriously unreliable and inadequate, a primary cause for the high burnout and turnover rate of Barr's fellow ministers. Barr's eight-year stint itinerating was actually longer than that of the average Adventist minister.

Perhaps Barr's most consequential partnership was with Joseph Bates. When the two began working together in May 1855, Bates was 62 years old, by then a senior figure in the movement, and, along with the Whites, was acknowledged as the leader of the movement. Barr and Bates worked particularly well in tandem, conducting 12 to 20 meetings throughout New England in 1855.²² In those days any visitors to small towns were newsworthy, and a white man in his sixties with a black man in his thirties preaching unfamiliar doctrines must have been an especial draw. In Canaan, Maine, for instance, a tent was erected in the front yard of a Sabbatarian named Robert Barnes and a crowd of roughly 500 attended.²³ Baptisms resulted from their efforts. Two representative reports are of seven baptized in East Unity, New Hampshire, in July 1855, and three baptized in Berlin, Connecticut, the next month.²⁴ It was during this period that Bates cemented his place as cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the significance of Barr laboring alongside with him should not be undervalued.

In his eight-year itinerancy, Eri Barr was responsible for between 150-300 people becoming Sabbatarian Adventists. Since the total adherents in the late 1850s were estimated to be between 2,000-3,000, Barr's efforts were substantial. He also facilitated the expansion of the movement in another way, one that demonstrates his significance as a Sabbatarian leader. He organized and chaired numerous "general conferences" – gatherings, usually two or three days long, devoted to strategizing and mobilizing Sabbatarians for evangelism in a given area.

In his first such meeting in June 1856, Barr chaired a conference that overrode "some leading Brn." about where one of the movement's only tents used for religious meetings should go, and appointed the men who would staff it and serve as "tent treasurers."²⁵ As a secretary of the New England Conference in Boston, January 1857, Barr co-led proceedings that established a fund and a manager to disperse Adventist publications, and appointed tent committees with charter members for three states, responsible for allocating offerings given for tent meetings.²⁶ He chaired a pivotal meeting in early September 1857 in which it was decided that five general conferences would take place that Fall, indicating the time and location of each, with ten resolutions on spiritual preparations of Sabbatarians for the conferences. Barr was chosen to attend each of these state meetings to provide guidance on how the meetings should be conducted.²⁷ In what was probably his final major meeting, Barr was appointed chair of a business meeting in Roosevelt, New York, in June 1859, where it was decided that a new financing system would be implemented in the region: \$400 was pledged to operate the "New York tent" and two ministers appointed to work with the tent enterprise; and, a five-member committee was formed for periodical circulation.²⁸

Again, Eri Barr's leadership on these committees was integral to the growth of the movement and all the more remarkable that he did so as a black man in antebellum New England. In the 1850s, the acceptability of a black man preaching to whites was far from universal, even in New England; a black leader of whites in a predominately white movement would have been even more controversial. Suffice it to say, it would not be until more than a century later that blacks took a leadership role in general Adventist conferences that directed the movement at large.

As it did with several other Sabbatarian leaders, Barr's frenetic pace had a deleterious effect on his domestic life. On December 10, 1858, Lori Barr obtained a divorce from Eri for the cause of "willing absence." The marriage had lasted for just over sixteen years.²⁹ During this period Barr caused a shake-up among Sabbatarians in Berlin, Connecticut, by isolating those whom he deemed had not heeded the Laodicean message, as well as urging believers to burn daguerreotypes (a type of costly picture and frame setting), with the rationale that the considerable monies spent on the pictures should have been used to fund the spread of the gospel. Both James and Ellen White chastised Barr

especially for this, given his stature in the movement. James wrote that “We have been surprised and grieved to learn how some have run from place to place on the cars, encouraging a fanatical spirit in burning daguerreotypes, &c., worse than wasting their Lord’s money, and leaving the brethren in distraction.”³⁰ Ellen White, meanwhile, had two visions featuring Barr, and severely rebuked him for his extreme application of the Laodicean message and the daguerreotype furor. “I saw that Brother Barr has not been standing in the counsel of God. He has had a wrong spirit, has followed impressions and feeling. It has led him astray. I saw that he was more to be blamed in Connecticut than the church there,” she wrote. “He, a servant of Jesus Christ, should be ready to correct these wrong influences in the church, but he gave support to them instead of correcting them, and I saw that he had better have been working with his hands than exerting this wrong influence in the church.”³¹ Barr apologized for his actions to Adventists in Berlin, and followed up with a lengthy mea culpa in the *Review and Herald* in the summer of 1862.³² He also notably stood in support of James White’s leadership when it was under attack.³³

Perhaps sensing that it was time to move on from New England, Barr had begun ministering in New York around June 1859 and chaired the aforementioned conference in Roosevelt, months before White’s missives about him. In September of that year he had delivered messages that were “refreshing and strengthening” to a crowd of one hundred in Ulysses, Pennsylvania, a *Review* correspondent affirming that “Bro. Barr will labor for a while here.”³⁴ The 1860 census finds him living fifteen miles from Ulysses in Willing, a small settlement in southwestern New York on the Pennsylvania border, with a farming family called the Whitters. His profession: “Advent Clergyman.”³⁵ Barr held several religious meetings with some of his old partners in small towns in the region of southwestern New York-northern Pennsylvania throughout 1859 and 1860. Most significantly, he led in organizing the Niles Hill Church in Alma, New York, which featured an edifice that was the meeting place for scores of early Adventists’ general meetings. Niles Hill became a vital center for the movement, for a time the lifeblood of its region and beyond.³⁶

In the spring of the previous year Barr had reported from Niles, New York, to *Review* readers that he was in “feeble health,” to the point that it was difficult for him to write. For the next three years Barr would battle with tuberculosis under the care of Daniel and Esther Oviatt, until he died a week before his fiftieth birthday on May 16, 1864, in Oviatt’s home in Alma, New York. Nathan Fuller, a delegate to the first General Conference and a leading voice in the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, stated that at Barr’s last moment “his mind was calm, and he felt that death would be a sweet rest.”³⁷

Contribution

Eri L. Barr was a significant figure in Sabbatarian Adventism. As a leading minister in the vital New England region in the 1850s, he was at the center of the burgeoning movement before its shift to the Midwest. As a ministerial partner with cofounder Joseph Bates, he assisted in the efforts that are recognized to be foundational to the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Beyond any single partnership, Barr was an untiring soul-winner in his own right, and as chairperson of several “general conferences,” he facilitated the growth of the movement beyond his own individual efforts. Unfortunately, it seems with the dissolution of his marriage and his extreme stances in the last years of the 1850s, that Barr fell prey to the burn-out that was endemic to Sabbatarian Adventist ministers. Nevertheless, despite a ministry lasting only about eight years, Barr should be regarded as a solid contributor to the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

There is another aspect of Barr’s legacy that merits remark. The contributions outlined above were made by an African American in the United States in the 1850s, while most of the members of his race were enslaved in the very same nation. In none of the extant documents of the period is Barr’s race mentioned, which may speak to the racial inclusivity or indifference of Adventists before the influx of Southern converts and the accompanying controversies over the “color line” in the latter part of the nineteenth century.³⁸ In fact, with the resources now available online, there have been discoveries of dozens of previously unknown African American Sabbatarian Adventists. These believers apparently lived and worshipped among whites with little racial tension. Perhaps as deeper investigation is done, even more early believers of color will be discovered, and the dynamics of race in early Adventism will be reassessed.

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NOTES

1. This article is dedicated to the late Stanley Hickerson (1952-2016), who reintroduced E.L. Barr in an *Adventist Review* piece (Stanley D. Hickerson, "Was Eri L. Barr the First Black Adventist Minister," *ARH*, April 6, 2015, <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story2511-was-eri-l.-barr-the-first-black-adventist-minister>).?
2. Although in some records the first name is rendered the more common "Eli" or "Evi," the most reliable records have it as "Eri."?
3. Birth Certificate, E.L. Barr, May 23, 1814, Vermont Vital Records 1720–1908, Ancestry.com.?
4. 1820 United States census; Reading, Windsor County, Vermont, Roll: M33_128, page 414, Image: 281, Ancestry.com.?
5. 1850 United States census, Goshen Gore, Caledonia County, Vermont; Roll: M432_922; page: 255A, Image: 502, Ancestry.com.?
6. "Died," *American Repertory and Advertiser*, 11 February 1823, 3.?
7. Elmina Bixby and William Barr, Marriage Certificate, October 15, 1831, Vermont Vital Records, 1871–1908, Ancestry.com.?
8. 1820 U. S. Census, Windsor, Windsor, Vermont; 1830 U. S. Windsor, Windsor, Vermont, Ancestry.com.?
9. Wesleyan Academy, *Catalogue of the Corporation, Officers, and Students, Winter and Spring Terms, 1836* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. and C. Merriam, 1836), 6. Wesleyan Academy, *Catalogue of the Corporation, Officers, and Students, Summer and Fall Terms, 1836* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. and C. Merriam, 1836), 7.?
10. Rev. David Sherman, *History of Wilbraham Academy, at Wilbraham, Mass* (Boston: McDonald & Gill Company, 1893), 224-230.?
11. Marriage Certificate, Eri L. Barr and Lori Z. Harvey, December 7, 1842, Vermont Vital Records, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Ancestry.com.?
12. E. L. Barr, "Letter From E.L. Burr [sic]," *The Voice of Truth, and Glad Tidings of the Kingdom at Hand* IV, No. 7, December 11, 1844, 184 (4).?
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- E. L. Barr, "Bro. E.L. Barr," *The Voice of Truth, and Glad Tidings of the Kingdom at Hand* IX, no. 11 (March 11, 1846), 88.?
14. 1850 United States census, Goshen Gore, Caledonia County, Vermont; Roll: M432_922; page: 255A, Image: 502, Ancestry.com.?
 15. Sabbatarian Adventist refers to the movement that preceded and became the Seventh-day Adventist Church, dating from 1845-1860. Sabbatarian and Adventist will be used interchangeably for Sabbatarian Adventists.?
 16. Eli (sic) L. Barr, "Dear Bro. White," *ARH*, 5 August 1852, 55-56.?
 17. See Kevin M. Burton, "Born a Slave, Died a Freeman," *ARH*, April 3, 2019 (<https://www.adventistreview.org/1904-52>); See Lawrence W. Onsager and James R. Nix, "Adventism's First Black Family," *ARH*, February 23, 2011 (<https://www.adventistreview.org/2011-1506-18>).?
 18. James White, "Eastern Tour," *ARH*, September 16, 1852, 80.?
 19. James White, "A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Present Truth," *ARH*, January 14, 1858, 77.?
 20. James White to Leonard Hastings, September 30, 1852, 1 (<http://ellenwhite.org/content/correspondence/white-js/020029-opdf>).?
 21. E. L. Barr, "Dear Bro. White," *ARH*, July 7, 1853, 31.?
 22. Joseph Bates, "Tent Meetings," *ARH*, October 2, 1855, 24.?
 23. Joseph Bates, "Tent Meetings," *ARH*, July 10, 1855, 4.?
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 25. E. L. Barr, "Canaan, Me., Conference," *ARH*, June 19, 1856, 64.?
 26. S. Pierce and E. L. Barr, "Report of Conferences," *ARH*, March 12, 1857, 152.?
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 28. F. Wheeler, "Conference in Roosevelt, N.Y.," *ARH*, June 30, 1859, 48.?
 29. Record of Divorce, Eri L. Barr and Lori Z. Barr, December 7, 1842, New Hampshire Bureau of Vital Records, Ancestry.com.?
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 32. Eri L. Barr, "From Bro. Barr," *ARH*, June 24, 1862, 80.?
 33. Uriah Smith, "The Defense of Elder James White and Wife," (Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1870), 75.?
 34. R. F. Cottrell, "Conference in Ulysses, Pa," *ARH*, 29 September 1859, 152.?
 35. 1860 U. S. Census, Willing, Allegany, New York, New York State Archives, Albany, New York., Ancestry.com?
 36. D. B. Oviatt, "New York," *ARH*, October 13, 1885, 635.?
 37. Nathan Fuller, E.L. Barr obituary, *ARH*, June 14, 1864, 23.?
 38. Two documents from Adventists divulge Barr's race. The first is a manuscript by Charles F. Stevens (1841-1936), brother of Harriet Smith, wife of Uriah Smith, and Angelina Smith, wife of J. N. Andrews (box 1, folder 25, Uriah Smith/Mark Bovee, Collection 146, Center for Adventist Research), 3. The second is a letter from H. E. Simkin to J. L. McElhany, January 16, 1944 (Presidential Incoming Letters, RG 11, General Conference Archives), 1. I am indebted to Douglas Morgan for the latter source.?