

Baker, Joseph

(1800–1862)

KEVIN M. BURTON

Kevin M. Burton, Ph.D. candidate (Florida State University). Burton did mission work in the Czech Republic and South Korea and served as chaplain at Ozark Adventist Academy. He currently teaches American history at Southern Adventist University and has published several articles on Adventist history. His M.A. thesis is titled, "Centralized for Protection: George I. Butler and His Philosophy of One-Person Leadership." Burton's doctoral dissertation explores Adventist political involvement in the abolition movement and Civil War.

Joseph Baker, an ordained Methodist minister who joined the Millerite movement around 1843, was for a few years prominent in the early development of Sabbatarian Adventism.

Early Life (1800-1827)

Baker's tombstone indicates that he was born on September 27, 1800, and other records reveal that he entered the world in Amherst, Hillsborough County, New Hampshire. His parents, Samuel Dakin Baker and Sarah Prince, were married on April 29, 1798, and raised twelve children in New Hampshire, presumably in the Methodist faith.¹ Aside from these scant details, nothing is known of Joseph Baker's early life, though it is probable that his father, like his father before him, was a poor farmer who did not own any land.²

Methodist Circuit Preacher and Home-maker (1827-1843)

Joseph Baker married Mary Austin on January 15, 1825, and they had four sons and two daughters born in the 1820s and 1830s.³ He emerged on the public scene in 1827 when he was "admitted on trial" as a young preacher in the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Baker first served in Lancaster, New Hampshire, with Orange Scott, who later became (along with La Roy Sunderland and George Storrs) one of the



Grave of Joseph Baker.

Photo courtesy of LadyGoshen. Source: *Find a Grave*,
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/128459435/joseph-baker>

earliest proponents of abolition within the Methodist Episcopal Church and subsequently became a co-founder of the Wesleyan Methodist Church.⁴ Baker itinerated in the New England Conference until New Hampshire and Vermont were separated from it in 1829 to form the New Hampshire and Vermont Conference.⁵ In 1831, Baker was ordained as a Methodist minister and continued to preach throughout this conference in the mountainous forests of Vermont and New Hampshire until the mid-1830s.⁶

Around 1836, Baker moved his family to Sullivan County, New Hampshire, and settled down to establish the first hame-making business (hames are curved pieces of iron or wood on a draft horse collar to which the traces attach) in Northville (now Newport). Joseph and Mary's oldest child, Charles, began to learn this trade from his father, though only a young lad of 9 or 10, and continued to work as a hame-maker his entire life. Joseph Baker kept his ministerial credentials and apparently served as a resident minister in Northville until the early 1840s.⁷

Millerite Preacher (1843-1850)

In the late 1830s and early 1840s, "the Miller excitement" swept through the northeastern sector of the United States. In about 1843 this movement "robbed" the Methodist Episcopal Church in Northville, New Hampshire, "of all its male members except for Father [Peter] Wakefield and Brother N. O. Page." Since he was a member of this congregation it is possible that Joseph Baker joined the Millerite movement at this time.⁸ Convinced that Christ was about to return, Baker resumed his former circuit with vigor and preached to "a large portion of the Adventists" in the mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire.

After Samuel Sheffield (S. S.) Snow predicted that Christ would return on October 22, 1844, Baker became especially fervent in the "Seventh Month Cry" announcing this message and became known as "one of God's strong men" in the movement.⁹ Though Baker went through the Great Disappointment, his particular experiences surrounding this event remain unknown. Like many other Millerites, former friends, neighbors, and acquaintances probably ridiculed Baker. Perhaps for this reason he relocated his family to Lebanon, New Hampshire, about 24 miles to the south of Northville. While there he did his best to "chain the three angels messages together," but remained perplexed until another former Millerite preacher visited him in the fall of 1850.¹⁰

Sabbatarian Adventist Minister (1850-1854)

Stephen Smith encouraged Joseph Bates to visit Baker in his discouragement. During his visit, Bates explained the Sabbath and Sanctuary doctrines to the family and Baker accepted the teachings.¹¹ In spite of this, it seems that he faltered some and did not become active in ministry again until early 1851. At this time James and Ellen White visited Baker and sought to persuade him to attend a Sabbath conference that would soon be held in Waterbury, Vermont, 70 miles to the north. Baker was in poor health, however, and unable to journey through the snow on horseback. Undeterred in his efforts, James White gave Baker five dollars so that he could travel to

the conference by train. Baker attended the meetings and resumed his preaching throughout Vermont and New Hampshire.¹²

Baker's preaching proved divisive, however, because he supported Joseph Bates' prediction that Christ would return in October 1851 and rejected Ellen White and her visions because they opposed time-setting. After Bates' prediction failed, the Whites met with Baker and other discouraged Adventists in November at a Sabbath conference in Johnson, Vermont.¹³ At this meeting Baker affirmed publicly that he had decided to "*Believe the visions*" because "they are inseparably connected with the third angel's message." The next day, Ellen White "was taken off in vision" and her "accompanying angel" told Baker, "Feed the sheep, feed the sheep."¹⁴ According to Washington Morse, "This was repeated several times, and the statement was added, 'This you must do, if you would live,' or words of similar import."¹⁵ Ellen White observed that "Brother Baker was comforted and made [spiritually] strong" by this vision and after "a spirit of prayer for him" the Lord miraculously healed his physical infirmities. Baker then "glorified God with a loud voice" as he "had a baptism of the Holy Ghost."¹⁶

He traveled extensively throughout New York, New England, and Canada East, as a Sabbatarian Adventist minister after the Johnson conference. He worked closely with many Adventist ministers during this time, including James and Ellen White, Joseph Bates, Hiram Edson, Frederick Wheeler, William S. Ingraham, and Eri L. Barr. He preached in Adventist homes and meetinghouses, and led out in a number of Sabbath conferences.¹⁷

After Sabbatarian Adventists began to systematize ministerial labor at the Ballston conference in March 1852, Baker (along with William S. Ingraham) began to oversee a large ministerial circuit, which included all of New England and Canada East. The purpose of this organization was to coordinate numerous Sabbath conferences within the Adventist sectors of that region of North America. Adventists also voted at the Ballston conference to purchase printing equipment and establish a publishing office in Rochester, New York. Consequently, Baker was selected to be on the *Review and Herald* Publishing Committee, and served in that capacity with Joseph Bates, J. N. Andrews, and James White until the summer of 1854.¹⁸

Baker was one of the leading Adventist preachers in the early 1850s, and since he was ordained as a Methodist minister, he was one of the first to ordain others to this office. In October 1853, a Sabbath conference was held in New Haven, Vermont. Along with James White, Baker ordained J. N. Andrews, A. S. Hutchins, and C. W. Sperry. Even though at least one other Sabbatarian Adventist was ordained earlier (Washington Morse), Sabbatarian Adventist leaders collectively decided to move forward by ordaining ministers at the New Haven conference.¹⁹

Although Baker was prominent in the Adventist cause between 1851 and 1854, he apparently suffered from poor health and began to slow down in the fall of 1853.²⁰ In September, Ellen White received a vision in Stowe, Vermont, and saw that Baker was "too cautious, moved too slowly," and was sometimes too severe in his reproof of others.²¹ Perhaps discouraged as well as ill, Baker did very little for the church after this. He published two articles in early 1854,²² but at a Rochester, New York, Sabbath conference in June, Baker (along with Joseph

Bates) requested that he be dropped from the Publishing Committee.²³ Thus Baker's work for the Adventist movement came to its end.

Final Years in Retirement (1854-1862)

Some three decades later, Washington Morse claimed that "Eld. Baker gave up laboring, and went down to the grave. . . . [T]he burden seemed heavier than he could carry, and he was lost to the cause which was in such great need of his work." Though hyperbolized, Morse's observation was essentially correct. Though Baker did end his work for the church in 1854, he did not give up his faith in Sabbatarian Adventist teachings. In 1857, he notified *Review* readers of his change in address, indicating that he had not severed his ties with the church.²⁴ He worked as a farmer during his last years, but his health was declining and he passed away on March 21, 1862, at the age of 61.²⁵

Contribution

Joseph Baker was one of the few ordained ministers in the early Sabbatarian Adventist movement. As such, he played an important role in the Church's first steps toward formal organization: the decision to begin ordaining ministers, the organization of Sabbath conferences, and the collective resolution to purchase printing equipment and establish a publishing house in Rochester, New York. Some early Adventist ministers were disappointed when Baker retired primarily because there were few qualified leaders at the time. In spite of this, Baker had guided many former Millerites along on the newly established Sabbatarian Adventist path and he did not give up this faith himself after his retirement.

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