

Lewis, John W. (1809–1861)

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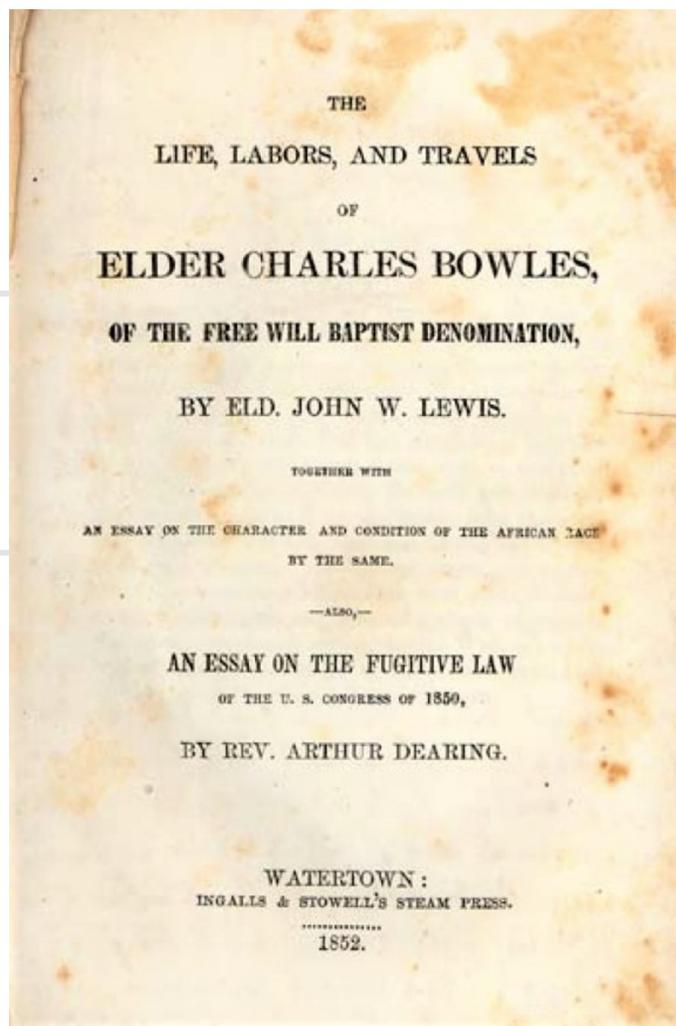
John W. Lewis was a black Freewill Baptist minister, abolitionist, educator, and author in the antebellum era. He was a Millerite minister at the height of the movement.

Early Life and Ministry

John W. Lewis was born to free blacks John B. and Sarah Williams Lewis on December 22, 1809, in South Berwick, Maine. By 1820 there were eight in the Lewis household; although the census does not provide names and relations, the family most likely consisted of John's parents, John and two brothers, a sister, and two women relatives.¹

Lewis states that at ten years old he began seriously thinking about religion, and for a decade was in a "state of inquiry & anxiety" before he "obtained a pardon and forgiveness of sins" and his "whole heart was lifted to God in thankfulness."² He decided to enter the ministry and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at the time pastored by the charismatic and controversial Irish preacher John Newland Maffitt.³ In preparation for the ministry, Lewis attended Wesleyan Academy, a Methodist preparatory school near Springfield, Massachusetts; he was one of the first blacks to attend the school. He studied at Wesleyan for two years. Four years later, early black Adventist minister Eri L. Barr would study at Wesleyan.⁴

Lewis was ordained a deacon by the AME Church in Philadelphia on June 2, 1832. Shortly after, he began his ministry in Newark, New Jersey. When he first baptized an infant by the sprinkling method, Lewis grew conflicted about the baptismal practices of the Methodists; he raised the issue with some older ministers but got no



Title page of Lewis' book published in 1852.

Source: Documenting the American South,
<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/lewisjw/lewisjw.html>.

satisfactory answers. On a visit to Maine, Lewis came into contact with Freewill Baptists, and he discovered that they practiced immersive baptism and held similar beliefs to his own in other fundamental areas of doctrine. The church was outspoken against slavery, as well, of critical importance to Lewis. He joined the church in April 1835.⁵

As a minister for the Freewill Baptists, Lewis engaged in a holistic ministry, preaching a gospel that prominently featured abolitionism and black uplift. His modus operandi throughout his ministerial career was to go to a town and preach the gospel, the first precept of which was antislavery. Before he baptized anyone, they had to, in his words, “pledge and determine to strike, by their moral power and religious influence, at the root of slavery, and not to give over till this Babel of abominations shall fall.”⁶ Slavery was the first subject on his preaching schedule, and he often did not move on to another precept until his audience verbally condemned slavery. As Lewis once stated, “My prayer is that God would pour out his spirit on the people, that they may see that slavery is one of the greatest obstacles in the way of revivals.”⁷ Lewis was so motivated to bring on such a revival because he held that “if the whole church at the north would stand on the broad platform of God’s promises, and put all confidence in Him, and act accordingly, they would shake the whole foundation of slavery at the south.”⁸

While a minister, Lewis simultaneously operated as an agent for the abolitionist papers the *Liberator*, the *Colored American*, and the *Northern Star*. In these roles he promoted the papers in his travels, signed people up for subscriptions, wrote articles, and gave antislavery lectures. This melded well with Lewis’ other responsibilities as agent for several antislavery societies, which entailed lecturing, attending meetings, and promoting antislavery initiatives.⁹ Lewis’ burden for black uplift extended beyond the emancipation of the enslaved, though. He was an educator, the founder and principal of the New-England Union Academy, a primary and secondary school for black youth.¹⁰ He was also the founder and president of the first black temperance society in New England, which sought to teach blacks principles of healthful living, chief among them the jettisoning of vices like tobacco and alcohol.¹¹

Two of Lewis’ contemporaries provide physical descriptions of him. Parker Pillsbury, a well-known abolitionist, described Lewis as “a very large and unusually black Baptist minister.” A news item from 1840 depicted him as “a jet black colored man.” By all accounts, Lewis’ oratory was compelling. One attendee of a Lewis speech wrote: “He delivered . . . a speech which was at once logical and pointedly sarcastic . . . the audience hung upon his words in breathless silence. . . . Neither the speech nor the man will be easily forgotten by those who were present.”¹²

Millerite Ministry

John Lewis probably became a Millerite in late 1842 or early 1843. The first mention of him in a Millerite paper appears in the *Signs of the Times* of June 7, 1843, which reports that at the Boston Advent Conference a week earlier, Charles Fitch made a motion that an offering be taken for a Millerite to evangelize among blacks. The

next day in response, a collection of \$30 (approximately \$965 in 2022) was taken up for Lewis, “the highly esteemed colored preacher,” to “spend his whole time laboring among that much neglected class of our brethren.”¹³ For a brief time, Lewis spent a great deal of his time and energy spreading the news of the imminent second coming of Christ among blacks.

Although Lewis’ new charge underscored the need for evangelism among blacks, Millerism had already proved attractive to both free and unfree black people, who saw in the teaching of the near advent a divine deliverance from their oppression in America that politics and human morality had failed to accomplish. Blacks also gravitated to the movement because it was led by staunch abolitionists and equality advocates who welcomed them into the fellowship. By the time of the Great Disappointment, thousands of blacks had become Millerites, mainly in the United States, but also in Canada and the Caribbean. Among these were blacks who would gain renown later in their efforts for human rights, including Sojourner Truth, William Still, Samuel Ringgold Ward, William Watkins, and Anthony Burns. Hundreds of enslaved blacks also embraced Millerism, many of whom had already had the hope of the second coming but were glad to hear that it was coming so soon. In sum, blacks were major participants in the Millerite movement.

As a Millerite, Lewis continued to preach against slavery, but lost faith in politics as the means to overthrow the entrenched system. He held, along with many other Millerites and William Miller himself, that the American government would not free black people—only God could and would. In April 1844, Lewis wrote a letter that appeared in the Millerite paper the *Midnight Cry* in which he stated that previously blacks had “founded our hope” on the goodness of white people and American politics to emancipate them. However, he bemoaned, “we are still in bondage and affliction, under an aristocratical power.” To his fellow blacks Lewis admonished, “do not, I beseech you, trust longer to an arm of flesh; do not hope in the legislatures of your country, or the congress of the nation, or the ballot box, or political parties.” Instead, blacks were to “fly to the Lord Jesus Christ as the only hope” and his soon coming for emancipation and ultimate justice.¹⁴ Unfortunately, there is no extant record of how Lewis dealt with the Great Disappointment and its aftermath.

Later Career

After his period as a Millerite, Lewis continued with his vigorous itinerary of gospel ministry and abolitionism. Residing variously in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine, he held religious revivals for the Freewill Baptists in the Northeastern US, his progress reports frequently appearing in the movement paper the *Morning Star*. In one such report from 1850 he rejoiced that he baptized 34 people in upstate New York.¹⁵ Lewis also embarked on multiple city antislavery lecture tours, such as a tour of 19 towns in Vermont in the second half of 1853.¹⁶ Lewis’ efforts for black freedom caused Frederick Douglass to remark in 1854 that Lewis “is one of the oldest and ablest advocates for human freedom ever raised up among the colored people of the United States.”¹⁷

But these accomplishments did not come easily. Like many black ministers and activists of the time, Lewis was frequently sick and poor, and he had to contend with the early deaths of family and spouses. Lewis informed his Freewill friends once that “a difficulty in my throat and lungs the past year has greatly disabled my labor.” But when he got better and was able to continue with his lectures, “great pecuniary embarrassment obstructs my course, with a dependent family to support.”¹⁸ Lewis publicly asked for financial assistance throughout the years so that he could continue doing gospel and antislavery work. Lewis also contended with untimely deaths. It is unclear when he first married, but his wife, Hester Lewis, died in 1848 at the age of 35. The brief obituary notice described her as “ardent in her affection for the cause of Christ all through her Christian life, and died peaceful and happy, to enjoy a seat in heaven.”¹⁹ Lewis remarried eleven years later to Jane Buckland Toomey, a black woman from Rhode Island.²⁰ It appears that Lewis did not have children.

In 1852 Lewis published *The Life, Labors, and Travels of Elder Charles Bowles*, a biography of Charles Bowles (1761-1843), an African American Freewill Baptist minister who spent decades as an itinerant preacher in Vermont.²¹ Lewis probably had several motivations for writing the volume. First, like Bowles, he was a Freewill Baptist minister and had followed in Bowles’ footsteps as a black man preaching to whites in Vermont. Lewis never met Bowles, but in Vermont he encountered people who knew Bowles and had experienced his extraordinary personality. Lewis drew from their accounts and Bowles’ journal entries to construct the biography. Adventist scholar Le Roy Froom avers that Bowles was a Millerite like Lewis, but presently there is no evidence for this.²² There was also no doubt a financial motivation for Lewis writing the book; at the time he was very poor and struggling with health challenges. Finally, Lewis as always had an abolitionist purpose, and included two essays as appendices to the volume: one he wrote titled “An Essay on the Character and Condition of the African Race,” and the other an essay decrying the 1850 fugitive slave law by white abolitionist minister Arthur Dearing. Lewis had 6,000 copies of his Bowles biography printed and sold them in his travels.²³

John Lewis did an about-face on his previously held convictions on political involvement to better the condition of blacks in his Millerite phase. In the late 1850s he became vice president for the Colored People’s Convention in Maine and New Hampshire, organizations that politically mobilized blacks to lobby for issues that advanced their interests.²⁴ During the same period he promoted a plan for African Americans to migrate to Haiti and establish a model settlement of racial equity and justice that could not be obtained in the United States. He left for Haiti to pioneer this settlement several days after Christmas of 1860. But Lewis’ plans were permanently dashed when he died in Haiti after a nine-day battle with neuralgia on August 29, 1861. He was 51 years old.²⁵

Contribution

John W. Lewis was one of a corps of antebellum black ministers who employed almost every means at their disposal to uplift blacks. Theirs was a life of remarkable service, as their writings, speeches, and general efforts indicate that the betterment of fellow blacks was uppermost in their concerns. Lewis’ brief spell as a Millerite

minister demonstrates the real appeal the movement had for blacks who were believers in the Christian gospel and were exasperated with the futility of the American political process to emancipate them. For blacks, Christ's imminent second coming was a legitimate belief that realized all of their aspirations, despite the ridicule they and other Millerites experienced for this belief. Ultimately, Lewis joined thousands of blacks who did not live to see the fruit of their considerable labors that occurred when some four million blacks were, at least physically, emancipated in 1865.

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NOTES

1. 1820 U S Census; Census Place: South Berwick, York, Maine; Page: 641; NARA Roll: M33_39; Image: 310.
2. John W. Lewis, "Religious Intelligence, &c.," *Morning Star*, June 24, 1835, 31/3. Many thanks to Kevin M. Burton for tracking down a trove of Lewis sources.
3. See Robert E. Cray, Jr., "High style and low morals: John Newland Maffitt and the Methodist church 1794-1850," *Methodist History*, vol. 45, issue 1, October 2006, 31-42.
4. Benjamin Baker, "Barr, Eri L. (1814-1864)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=8CDT>.
5. Lewis, "Religious Intelligence, &c.," 31/3.

6. See John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, June 24, 1840, 35; John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, January 6, 1841, 146; John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, May 13, 1846, 15; John W. Lewis to Bro. Burr, *Morning Star*, March 29, 1854, 203.
7. John W. Lewis to Br. Burr, *Morning Star*, September 27, 1837, 86.
8. John W. Lewis, "Moral Action," *Morning Star*, February 26, 1840, 1.
9. "Letter of Resignation," *Liberator*, January 15, 1841, 2; "Baptist Register," *Colored American*, May 8, 1841, 39; "Agents," *Northern Star and Freeman's Advocate*, February 10, 1842, 1.
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13. N. Southard, "Declaration of Principles," *Signs of the Times*, June 7, 1843, 108.
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19. S.T. Catlin, *Morning Star*, April 19, 1848, 4.
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24. "New England Colored Citizens' Convention," *Liberator*, August 19, 1859, 3.
25. "Death of Rev. J.W. Lewis," *Liberator*, January 17, 1862, 11.

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