

# Storrs, George

## (1796–1879)

JONATHAN GOMIDE

Jonathan Gomide is a theology student at the Adventist Seminary in Northern Brazil (SALT Faama).

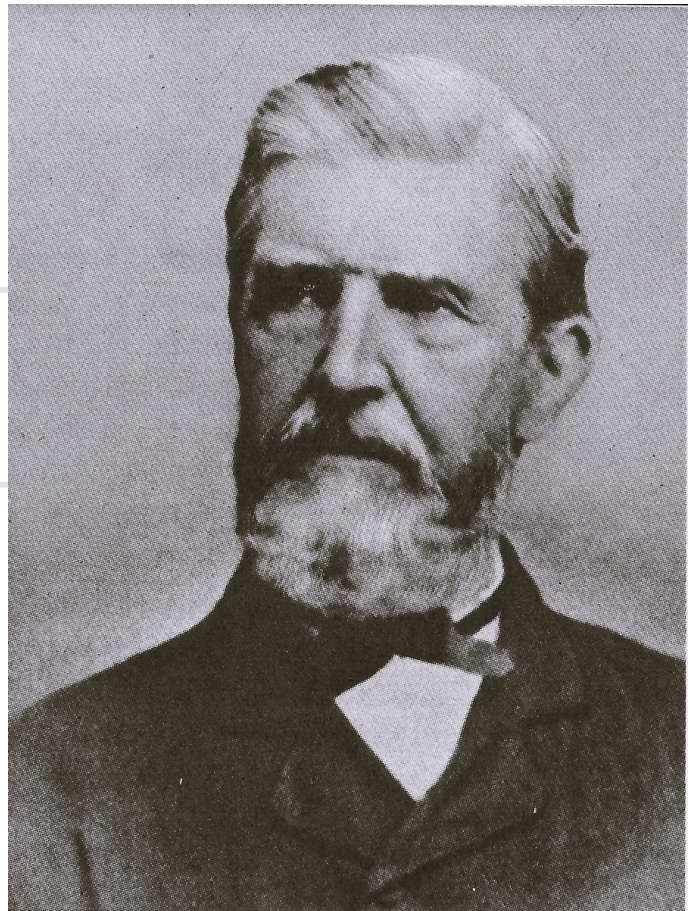
George Storrs was a Second Advent preacher, abolitionist, editor, and writer, whose radical views on immortality and organization impacted the early development of Seventh-day Adventist belief and practice.

### Early Life (1796-1814)

Storrs was born on December 13, 1796, in Lebanon, New Hampshire.<sup>1</sup> His parents, Colonel Constant Storrs (1752-1828) and Lucinda Howe (1758-1839), married in the fall of 1780, during the American Revolution.<sup>2</sup> The couple moved to Lebanon, which was then “almost a wilderness.” The family prospered, and Colonel Storrs “became a wealthy farmer.” Eight children were born into the family, seven boys and one girl, George being the youngest.<sup>3</sup>

Lucinda Storrs was deeply concerned with the spiritual welfare of her children, always watching over their “religious instruction.” Constant Storrs, on the other hand, was more interested in making them successful in earthly pursuits. Lucinda would frequently gather her children around her, “particularly on the Sabbath,” and teach them about God. She was decidedly unwilling to leave her children’s eternal interests to the minister, “or any other less interested in their welfare than a *Mother*.”<sup>4</sup>

The Congregationalist church, with the strongly Calvinist orientation of its ministers, constituted the dominant religious influence in Lebanon during Storrs’ childhood. Lucinda Storrs lamented the “tendency to fatalism” which permeated many of the sermons. She tried to “counteract” their influence by telling her children “unceasingly, that if they would seek the Lord he would be found of them.” Storrs would later write that “such pious labor was not lost.”<sup>5</sup>



George Storrs

Credit: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

During his teenage years, from 1811 to 1813, Storrs became disillusioned with religion. It was the “most thoughtless period” of his life. He did not feel drawn to the many fire-and-brimstone sermons he heard dwelling on “the torments of hell.” Shortly before turning 18, however, he removed himself from “all excitement,” and began meditating in isolation. It was then that he became “so affected with a sense of the *goodness* of God,” that he decided to “pray daily.”<sup>6</sup> Storrs told no one of the “revolution going on” within himself. His private spiritual struggle, which lasted for over a year, intensified with the death of his sister, Lucinda, on November 18, 1814, at the age of 22.<sup>7</sup>

## Conversion, Marriage, and Abolitionism (1815-1836)

In 1815, a revival spread through Lebanon. George Storrs, along with 20 others, joined the Congregational Church. Three years later, in 1818, Storrs married Harriet Waterman (1796-1824), a daughter of Colonel Thomas Waterman, “one of the most prominent men” in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> They were “happily married,” for they were “of like faith in Christ.” One daughter was born from this marriage, Laura Ann, who died in infancy.<sup>9</sup> Harriet became ill in 1820, gradually growing weaker during the course of the next four and a half years and died on June 15, 1824.<sup>10</sup>

During his wife’s illness, Storrs had been invited to hear a Methodist minister. Impressed, he invited the preacher to his house. The ensuing visits were a “source of comfort” to Storrs and his bedridden wife. Soon after Harriet’s death, he joined the Methodists. In 1825, he became a preacher in the “Methodist Traveling Connection,” traveling a circuit in conducting his ministry rather than being assigned a settled pastorate. That same year he married Martha Waterman (1800-1882), another daughter of Thomas Waterman.<sup>11</sup> They had two children, George F. Storrs and Harriet W. Storrs.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1830s Storrs was becoming more and more concerned with slavery. In his mind, Bible doctrine was perfectly connected with the freedom of the enslaved. Storrs’ preaching, therefore, naturally merged into a career of abolitionist lecturing, for both were founded upon Scripture. In 1835, Storrs received a letter from the Anti-Slavery Society in Northfield, New Hampshire, inviting him to deliver “an Anti-Slavery *Sermon*.” Storrs quickly wrote back to James Templeton, who had sent the invitation. “The captives MUST go free,” he wrote. “God is on our side.”<sup>13</sup>

Arriving at Northfield, Storrs was warmly welcomed by “whole-hearted” abolitionists, but when he entered the meeting-house to preach, he noticed that the deputy sheriff had walked in, and was gazing “round the house.” After his sermon Storrs knelt for a prayer in which he prayed for the president of the United States, for Congress, and those held in slavery. He was about to pray for the slave-owners, when the sheriff stood up and arrested him mid-prayer, on charges that he was “a *vagrant* and an *idler*.”<sup>14</sup> The event caused a sensation throughout New England. Some, turning to history, found Storrs’ outrageous arrest worthy of comparison to “the fires of persecution” of “the seventeenth century.”<sup>15</sup> Even famous abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Elizur Wright took notice of the daring preacher, calling him a “powerful” lecturer, ready to

“thunder” forth his convictions.<sup>16</sup>

Storrs remained a Methodist traveling minister until 1836, when he was made a “Local Preacher.” However, without appointment to a church, he began traveling “more extensively than ever.”<sup>17</sup> Storrs’ fervent abolitionist lectures struck many of the Methodist bishops as incongruent with Methodist doctrine. According to Storrs’ own account, the bishops made it hard for him to conduct his ministry. They “endeavored by every possible means to suppress the discussion” of slavery. True to his belief, Storrs nonetheless persisted in “lecturing and preaching” during the next three years, despite hostility. He became “impatient at the conservative tendency of the church”<sup>18</sup> and determined never to “submit to leave” his Christian duty in the hands of “any body of men, however good they might be.”<sup>19</sup> This led him to sever his connection with Methodism in 1840.

## Millerism and the “Endless-Torture Doctrine” (1837-1844)

Storrs had never doubted that “man possessed an immortal soul” until 1837 when he read a pamphlet in which Philadelphian Henry Grew argued that the wicked did not endure endless torture in hellfire, but were rather completely annihilated.<sup>20</sup> After careful examination over a period of years, Storrs became convinced by the biblical evidence. In the spring of 1841, he published *An Inquiry: Are the Souls of the Wicked Immortal? In Three Letters*. The following year, his well-known *Six Sermons* were published, expanding on the original argument for the non-immortality of the wicked.<sup>21</sup>

After breaking with Methodism, Storrs moved his family to Albany, New York, in August of 1841, where he established a small church “on the principle of ‘receiving one another as Christ had received them.’” Storrs declared that “the Bible was the only creed—Christian character the only test.”<sup>22</sup>

Calvin French, a Baptist minister who had recently become a Millerite, met with Storrs a few weeks after the publication of *Six Sermons* in 1842. Storrs was impressed with what he heard, and allowed French to preach in his nondenominational church called the “House of Prayer.”<sup>23</sup> Becoming “partially convinced of the correctness” of the premillennial Advent of Christ, Storrs invited Charles Fitch to come and “preach to the people” at Albany.<sup>24</sup> A large tent was erected, and thousands flocked to the meetings. Fitch preached “the coming of the Lord” with “great power.” During Fitch’s time in Albany, Storrs “became settled” that Christ would soon appear. In the fall of 1842 Storrs left Albany to preach the premillennial Second Advent to wider audiences.<sup>25</sup>

At first, he preached the soon coming of Christ without incorporating his “peculiar views” on the afterlife. But when the *Signs of the Times*—the leading Millerite periodical—“came out strong” against a fellow preacher who advocated conditional immortality,<sup>26</sup> Storrs felt compelled to act. He revised his *Six Sermons* and published 15,000 copies in December of 1842, scattering them “all over the United States, at his own expense.”<sup>27</sup>

Also with his own funds, Storrs launched the *Bible Examiner* in 1843, initially published on an occasional basis, then regularly from 1847 to 1854. Its motto was “No IMMORTALITY, or ENDLESS LIFE EXCEPT THROUGH JESUS

CHRIST ALONE.”<sup>28</sup> The *Six Sermons* were circulated as far as England, where Storrs’ writings against the “endless-torture doctrine” provoked a debate, with writers on both sides of the issue citing the avant-garde American preacher.<sup>29</sup> According to Isaac C. Wellcome’s history of the Second Advent movement, the *Bible Examiner* “was not recognized as properly an advent publication.” Many of the Millerites found Storrs to be “very erratic and radical” in pushing for “what he judged to be truth.”<sup>30</sup>

In the spring of 1843, Storrs was invited to preach in Philadelphia, and thousands came out to hear him. He took the opportunity to print 2,000 extra copies of *Six Sermons*, distributing the material to the congregation. Storrs was confident that those who read were “either convinced of the truth, or had their prejudices so far removed as to feel no opposition.”<sup>31</sup> Diverging views (at that point) on conditional immortality did not prevent Storrs and Joshua V. Himes, the leading promoter and organizer of the Second Advent movement, from holding meetings together in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the fall of 1843. The meetings were a success, with more than 500 people converting to Millerism. Storrs remained in Cincinnati after the close of the meetings to edit the *Western Midnight Cry*.<sup>32</sup>

In 1844, Storrs’ increasing prominence and the influence of his annihilationist teaching concerned Millerite leaders. One prominent figure, Charles Fitch, declared his agreement with Storrs on “the state of the dead, and of the final doom of the wicked” in a letter of January 25, 1844.<sup>33</sup> But Miller, who had expressed his utter disdain for annihilationism as early as 1814,<sup>34</sup> was led to make a public pronouncement against Storrs’ ideas in the May 1844 edition of the *Midnight Cry*: “I cannot be silent without dissenting from this any longer, it would be a crime against God and man. Therefore I disclaim any connection, fellowship, or sympathy with Br. Storrs’ views of the intermediate state, and end of the wicked.”<sup>35</sup> Josiah Litch proved to be the most outspoken critic of Storrs’ views, publishing a periodical dedicated to refuting them, the *Anti-Annihilationist*, beginning in April 1844.<sup>36</sup>

The principal concern of Millerite leaders was to avoid dividing the movement over these issues. At a general conference in Boston in May 1844 they avoided heavy-handed anathematizing of Storrs’ teaching. They simply affirmed that the final state of the wicked was “no part of the Advent faith.” With Christ so near at hand, debate over conditional immortality was seen as a distraction from the urgent mission of warning the world.<sup>37</sup>

Besides denying the “endless-torture doctrine,” Storrs promoted radical developments such as Fitch’s call in 1843 to “come out of Babylon”—the established churches that opposed the Second Advent message.<sup>38</sup> With his stormy history of adhering to peculiar beliefs, Storrs had a ready affinity for Fitch’s message. Storrs expressed his own radical opposition to the authority of any church organization, arguing that “confusion” arose from “the manufacturing of creeds, whether written or oral, and endeavoring to organize a party.”<sup>39</sup>

Storrs also became fully committed to the “seventh-month message” preached by Samuel S. Snow, designating October 22, 1844, as the date on which Christ was expected to return to earth.<sup>40</sup> On October 3, 1844, Storrs wrote: “I take up my pen with feelings such as I never before experienced. *Beyond a doubt*, in my mind, the *tenth day of the seventh month* will witness the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the clouds of heaven.”<sup>41</sup> One week

later, on October 10, Storrs published a piece in the *Midnight Cry* that would become known as “Storrs’ Flat Rock.” In the article, he told an allegory of a “glorious and mighty prince” who promised to take all who trusted him to a “glorious country”—provided they waited on a “large flat rock” strung in the middle of the ocean. The real catch was that the people had to let their boats float away into the horizon—thus demonstrating their implicit trust in the prince’s promise. Then came the punchline: “Cut your ropes now, brethren; let your boats float out of sight; yea, make haste before the ‘sign of the Son of man appear.’ Then it will be too late. Venture *now*—and venture *all*.”<sup>42</sup>

In the time leading up to October 22, Storrs was in Philadelphia, where a serious bout of extremism ensued. A Millerite fanatic named Dr. R. C. Gorgas convinced Storrs that he had received an apocalyptic vision that Christ would return at 3:00 A.M. on October 22—the “ninth hour” of the Jewish day. Gorgas claimed that he had been “led to the Cross on the Clock striking 3” and published a broadside with a graphic chart of his predictions. On October 18, Storrs used his influence to get Gorgas’ material published in a *Midnight Cry* Extra. Because the document was from Storrs, the editor assumed it was legitimate and did not even read it until several hundred copies had been distributed. The editors stopped the presses the next morning, but it was too late to prevent copies containing Dr. Gorgas’ extreme views from falling into the hands of newspaper editors, contributing to the eventually well-worn tales about wild-eyed Millerites that entered the popular lore.<sup>43 44</sup>

## Scattered Adventism and Organization (1845-1863)

On November 8, two-and-a-half weeks after the Millerite Disappointment of October 22, Storrs acknowledged, “I was wrong to preach the coming of the Lord on the tenth of the seventh month with the *positiveness* that I did.” He attributed his error to a “mere human influence, which I call *Mesmerism*.” He stressed, though, that he did not believe that it was wrong to have preached “the strong probability of the Lord’s coming at that time, and give the Scripture argument in favor of it.” Storrs concluded his “Confession” by declaring, “I am now looking *daily* for the coming of our Lord, and striving by grace, to be always ready for it.”<sup>45</sup>

After 1844, Millerism splintered into factions. In the confusing swirl of differing explanations, claims, and proposals for moving forward, Storrs was one of the preeminent critics of organizing a new denomination, holding to the position he expressed in February 1844:

Take care that you do not seek to organize another church. No church can be organized by man’s invention but what it becomes Babylon the moment it is organized. The Lord organized his own church by the strong bonds of love. Stronger than that cannot be made; and when such bonds will not hold together the professed followers of Christ, they cease to be his followers, and drop off from the body as a matter of course.<sup>46</sup>

However, during the 1850s Storrs’ *Six Sermons* continued to circulate by the thousands, contributing to sharpening division between the non-seventh-day observing Adventist groups over conditional immortality.

This, in turn, eventually led to the long-resisted organization of competing denominations. Adherents of the immortality of the soul formed the American Evangelical Adventist Conference in 1858, followed by the conditionalists who established the Advent Christian Association in 1860.<sup>47</sup>

Further division came about over the teaching, accepted by Storrs, that the wicked dead would not be resurrected. Proponents of this view formed the Life and Advent Union in 1863, with Storrs himself accepting the presidency of this “quasi-denomination.” He also served as editor of the group’s periodical, *Herald of Life and of the Coming Kingdom*. The United States census of 1890 recorded 1,018 members of the Life and Advent Union, but their numbers dwindled in the twentieth century, leading to a merger with the Advent Christian Association in 1964.<sup>48</sup>

## Later Life and Legacy (1863-1879)

In addition to writing tracts and pamphlets, Storrs continued to edit the *Herald* until 1871. He was replaced due to controversy over his teaching “that probation to the living nations at Christ’s second coming would be extended beyond that event” and that “those among the dead who had not heard the gospel and rejected it would arise and share in that probation” (referred to as the “Age to Come” doctrine). Storrs then revived the *Bible Examiner*, issued monthly.<sup>49</sup>

In March 1879, physicians diagnosed him with an “abscess in the kidneys.” The condition improved in August, but worsened in September, rendering him unable to eat. Storrs’ daughter, Hattie, dismayed at her father’s suffering, told him, “father, it is too bad that you must suffer so.” Storrs replied, “no, my daughter, it is not *too* bad, but it is *very* bad; still I can bear it, the Lord helping me.”<sup>50</sup> He died on December 28, 1879, at the age of 83. Interment took place on December 30, at the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.<sup>51</sup>

Seventh-day Adventist pioneer John Loughborough wrote that Storrs contributed to the “great second advent movement” in two key ways: First, Storrs’ unbounded enthusiasm “exerted a mighty influence,” leading early Adventists to fully commit to spreading the Second Advent message. Second, Storrs’ views on conditional immortality helped point early Seventh-day Adventism toward a key doctrine as the movement worked at constructing a firm biblical foundation.<sup>52</sup>

Beyond these two points, Storrs also unwittingly helped the Sabbatarian Adventists establish their position on organization. They had shared Storrs’ hostility toward organization to a great extent. Co-founder James White, who worked hard for moderation of those views, would write that “those who drafted the form of organization adopted by S[eventh] D[ay] Adventists labored to incorporate into it, as far as possible, the simplicity of expression and form found in the New Testament.”<sup>53</sup> Ironically, White’s description matched with Storrs’ ultimate goal, that of believers uniting under a simple, biblical gospel.

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1. Thomas L. Tullock, "Methodism in Portsmouth," *Granite Monthly: A New Hampshire Magazine* 6, no. 10 (July 1883): 315.
2. They were married on October 3, 1780. "A Partial Record of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, from Town Clerk's Records, Lebanon, N.H.," in Eben Putnam, ed., *The Genealogical Quarterly Magazine and Magazine of New England History*, Vol. 2 (Burlington, VT, 1901), 243.
3. Tullock, "Methodism in Portsmouth," 315.
4. George Storrs, *Six Sermons on the Inquiry Is There Immortality in Sin and Suffering?* (New York, NY: Bible Examiner, 1855), 5, 6. Italics in the original.
5. Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 6.
6. Ibid, 7. Italics in the original.
7. "A Partial Record of Births, Deaths, and Marriages," 253.
8. Tullock, "Methodism in Portsmouth," 315; Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 8.
9. "Laura Ann Harriet Storrs," *Find a Grave*, Memorial ID 104024975, January 22, 2013, accessed December 22, 2023, [https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/104024975/laura\\_ann-harriett-storrs#source](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/104024975/laura_ann-harriett-storrs#source).
10. Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 8.
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all caps in the original.

14. *Mob, Under Pretence of Law*, 7
15. Ibid, 3.
16. George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 193-194.
17. Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 9.
18. Tullock, "Methodism in Portsmouth," 315.
19. Ibid, italics in the original.
20. "Memoir," *Bible Examiner*, March 1880, 399.
21. Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 195; Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 11; "Memoir," 399.
22. "Memoir," 399-400.
23. Isaac C. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message and Mission, Doctrine and People* (Yarmouth, ME: I. C. Wellcome, 1874), 220, 281;  
Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 195.
24. "Memoir," 400.
25. Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 13; "Memoir," 400; Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message*, 281.
26. Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 13, 14.
27. Ibid, 14.
28. Ibid, 17, all caps in the original.
29. Ibid, 16.
30. Wellcome, *History of the Second Advent Message*, 515-516.
31. "Memoir," 401.
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33. Quoted in Storrs, *Six Sermons*, 15.

34. Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 197, 198.
35. William Miller, "Letter from Mr. Miller," *Midnight Cry*, May 23, 1844, 355.
36. Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 198.
37. "Address of the Conference," *Midnight Cry*, June 13, 1844, 378; Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 198.
38. Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 194.
39. George Storrs, "Come Out of Her, My People," *Midnight Cry*, February 15, 1844, 237; P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1977), 82, 83, 96-98.
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44. Ibid.
45. George Storrs, "Confession," *Midnight Cry*, November 14, 1844, italics in the original.
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48. Ibid., 288, 329.
49. George Storrs, "Special Notice," *Bible Examiner*, September 1877, 355; "Memoir," 402-404.
50. Ibid, 403.
51. Ibid.
52. Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement*, 125.

53. James White, "Organization and Discipline," *ARH*, January 4, 1881, 8; Loughborough, *The Great Second Advent Movement*, 345.

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