

Byington, John

(1798–1887)

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John Byington was a circuit-riding preacher, abolitionist, and first General Conference president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

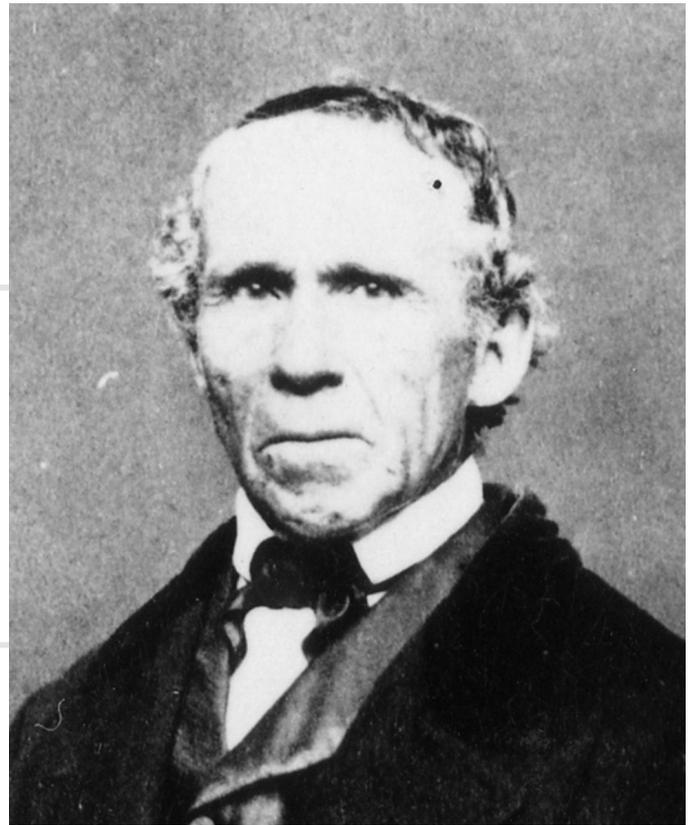
Early Life

John Byington was a descendant of the Anglo-Irish Boyntons of Yorkshire, England, some of whom had immigrated to Massachusetts Bay in 1638. John

Byington was born on October 8, 1798, in Hinesburg, Vermont, to Justus Byington (1763–1839), a Revolutionary War veteran and circuit-riding Methodist-Episcopal preacher, and Lucy (Hinsdale) Byington (1759–1852), who had recently moved from Connecticut to Vermont. Together they had ten children: Anson (born 1788), Lucy (born 1790), Archibald (born 1792), Milo (born 1794), Orilla (born 1796), John (born 1798), Betsey (born 1800), Lorain (born 1802), and Justus Jr. (born 1805). Because of the nature of Justus Sr.'s peripatetic ministry between 1803 and 1820, the family moved frequently around Vermont and northern New York.

In 1816, at age 18, John experienced conversion; the following year he received an exhorter's license to preach for the Methodist-Episcopal Church in Vermont. After completing his probationary period, John was ordained to the gospel ministry and assigned a preaching circuit in northern Vermont and New York, for which he was paid \$100 a year.

While there is no evidence that John Byington advanced beyond the eighth grade, the guidelines of the Methodist-Episcopal Church required circuit-riding preachers to be avid readers and book salesmen among their scattered flock. Byington's diaries indicate that he read widely, not only the Bible and the writings of John



John Byington.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

and Charles Wesley, but also historical and theological works. In addition, throughout his life, he subscribed to several newspapers, both secular and religious.

Although early nineteenth-century Methodists required full-time itinerant preachers to be celibate,¹ in the 1820s John spent part of his time preaching and the rest in farming, and he needed help running the farm. On October 15, 1823, he married Mary Priscilla Ferris (1803–1829), and together they had two daughters, Julia (who died shortly after birth in 1824) and Caroline (born in 1826). When Mary died of unknown causes in 1829, John married Catharine Newton, a school teacher, on January 25, 1830, and together they reared six children: Laura (born in 1831), John Fletcher (born in 1832), Martha (born in 1834), Teresa (born in 1837), Luther Lee (born in 1838), and William Wilberforce (born in 1840).

Farmer, Preacher, Reformer

In 1832 the Byingtons moved to Potsdam Township in St. Lawrence County, New York, where John purchased 82 acres of farmland along the banks of the Grasse River near Bucks Bridge. Within twenty years, the Byingtons' commercial farm, which had grown to encompass 200 acres, contained horses, oxen, cows, sheep, pigs, and many grain crops; it annually produced 800 pounds of butter, 800 pounds of cheese, and 200 pounds of maple sugar for sale in New York City and Boston. As John's children matured, they too bought farms in nearby Madrid, Canton, Morley, and Lawrence. Because John's sister Lucy Byington (1790–1854) married Henry Hilliard (1816–1892), for years the Byingtons and Hilliards would live near each other in New York and Michigan.

In the 1820s, contention over the bishops' autocratic power, limited lay representation, and infrequent elections in the Methodist-Episcopal Church inspired 200 members and fourteen ministers—including Justus Byington—to form a dissident movement called the Associate Methodist Reformers, which by 1830 had become the Methodist Protestant Church. While they retained most of the Articles of Religion and followed the General Rules of the Methodist-Episcopal Church, they abolished the offices of bishop and presiding elder, convened more committees to conduct church business, gave local preachers more authority, allowed deacons to baptize and perform marriages, and drew up a new constitution.

While John sympathized with many of the positions taken by the Methodist Protestant Church, during the 1830s he continued preaching for the Methodist-Episcopal Church. In 1833 he formed the First Methodist Society in Potsdam Township and was elected one of its five trustees. In 1834 he built a wood and fieldstone chapel (which still stands) for its 130 members at the Morley-Bucks Bridge crossing and became their first pastor. In 1839 the Canton Circuit granted him a license to preach.

Yet because neither the Methodist-Episcopal Church nor the Methodist Protestant Church opposed slavery in the 1830s, scores of Methodist ministers—including John Byington—seceded from these two denominations and in 1843 formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church. John supported the new Church's refusal to admit as members anyone who owned slaves or sanctioned the existence of slavery. In addition, the Wesleyans opposed

holding membership in secret societies.

In 1843 and 1844, members chose John as a delegate to the Wesleyan Methodist General Conference in Cleveland, Ohio, where he served on the prestigious Committee on Revisals to reshape discipline in the Church. In 1843 he built a Wesleyan Methodist Church and in 1845 a parsonage in Morley (both still stand), and by 1847 became the pastor. In 1848 he was ordained as pastor of the Lisbon congregation, and a year later, he erected a chapel and parsonage for them as well. In 1845 John helped form the St. Lawrence Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, which encompassed seven northern New York counties.

Anti-Slavery Activist

Sometime during the 1830s, John, his brother Anson, and other members of the Byington family became abolitionists. They joined the American Anti-Slavery Society (formed in 1833) and were active in local and state anti-slavery groups. Between 1838 and 1842, Anson Byington served as an officer in the Chittenden County, Vermont, Anti-Slavery Society, whose members pledged to use their moral, financial, religious, and political influence to eradicate slavery in the United States. For his radical views, Anson was expelled from the Congregational Church in Williston, Vermont, in 1849.

Between 1844 and 1852, John Byington was likewise an active participant in the anti-slavery movement both at the county, state, and national level. He chaired meetings of the St. Lawrence Anti-Slavery Society, the Abolitionist Convention, and the Friends of Freedom in Bucks Bridge, Potsdam, Parishville, Lawrence, and Canton, New York, and served as a delegate to the New York Anti-Slavery Society conventions. The Byingtons subscribed to abolitionist newspapers such as the *New England Christian Advocate* and the *True Wesleyan*. They were also active in the abolitionist movement at the national level. Between 1839 and 1854, several of them signed their names to petitions calling on the United States Congress to abolish slavery. In 1839 John's sister Lucy (Byington) Hilliard of Brasher signed such a petition; in 1845 and again in 1851 his brother Wesley Byington of Canton did so; in 1854 his brother Anson of Lawrence and another relative, S. S. Byington of Oswegatchie, added their names to a petition. According to one historian, John Byington and his brother-in-law, Henry Hilliard, also signed one or more anti-slavery petitions, although they are no longer extant.

In 1840 several abolitionists and evangelicals formed the Liberty Party, the first truly anti-slavery and libertarian national political organization. Members pressured legislators to take anti-slavery positions, to prevent the spread of slavery into the West, and to end the interstate slave trade. They favored separation of church and state and universal suffrage (including voting by women and blacks). Both Anson and John Byington played active roles in this political party. Between 1843 and 1848 John attended Liberty Party meetings in St. Lawrence County and chaired at least one session in the West Potsdam Church in 1843. When the Free Soil Party superseded the Liberty Party after 1848, the Byingtons actively supported its goal of preventing the spread of slavery throughout the West. When the Republican Party was formed in Jackson, Michigan in 1854 to oppose

slavery, the Byingtons joined that party, and John voted Republican for the next thirty years.

Members of the Byington family were also active in the Underground Railroad, helping fugitive slaves escape from the South and find new lives in Canada. Anson Byington's Chittenden County Anti-Slavery Society aided a dozen fleeing slaves each year, and Anson himself was one of two agents helping slaves escape to freedom along State Route 7, which passed through Williston, where Anson and fellow agent William French lived. In New York, John Byington served as one of the Underground Railroad agents for St. Lawrence County. Recent evidence indicates that he built secret "hide holes" to conceal black fugitives in the Methodist chapel in Bucks Bridge and in the parish house in Morley; he may have built one in his home in Bucks Bridge, but this cannot be confirmed as the house no longer exists.²

Sabbatarian Adventist Innovator

Sometime in late 1851, John's son Fletcher converted to Sabbatarian Adventism after reading a copy of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. Early in 1852, Aaron Hilliard also converted and shared a copy of the *Review* with John. In March 1852, shortly after burying their daughters Laura (age 21) and Teresa (age 15), who had died of smallpox, John and Catharine Byington accepted the Adventist message. On July 3, George Holt baptized them, their daughter Martha (1834–1937), and their son Fletcher in the Grasse River.³

Between 1852 and 1856, Byington frequently joined James White, C. W. Sperry, and August and Daniel Bourdeau in holding meetings throughout St. Lawrence County and Vermont; he also served as the *Review* agent for northern New York. During meetings in the Byington home in 1854, the family witnessed Ellen White in vision.

During the 1850s, the Byingtons promoted several innovations. In 1853–54, John's daughter Martha (age 19) taught seventeen elementary pupils in the first known Sabbatarian Adventist home school in Aaron Hilliard's parlor. In 1855–56 her brother Fletcher taught the school in Lisbon. In 1854 the Byingtons formed a Sabbath school in their home, with Catharine teaching the children, whose number grew to 44 by 1855. To provide for an expanding membership, in the summer of 1855, John built the first Sabbath-keeping Adventist meetinghouse in New York. In October James White held what may have been the first church dedication service there in what he called "this House of Prayer."

Preaching Ministry in Michigan

In May 1856 James and Ellen White invited Byington to Battle Creek, Michigan for a five-day conference. Impressed with his preaching and administrative accomplishments, they asked him to join them in combating dissident groups (such as the Messenger and age-to-come factions). John and Martha (who lived with the Whites) moved to Michigan in August 1857; Catharine and the rest of the children followed in the summer of 1858. Henry and Aaron Hilliard brought their families west in the spring of 1859. The Byingtons purchased a

farm in Ceresco, Newton Township, southeast of Battle Creek, while the Hilliards settled in Otsego to the northwest.

Between 1857 and 1887, John Byington followed the life of the circuit-riding preacher, crisscrossing Michigan and northern Indiana in a buggy, carriage, or sleigh pulled by his favorite horse, Dolly, in all kinds of weather, preaching, visiting in homes, and holding Sabbath school, church, prayer, testimony, and baptismal meetings. Unlike other ministers, Byington preferred holding revival meetings in Adventist churches rather than evangelistic meetings in tents. As an ordained minister, he also performed weddings (at five dollars each), officiated at funerals, and organized local churches. Usually either Martha (who played the pump organs and sang duets with her father) or Catharine accompanied him on these tours. Occasionally he joined Joseph Bates, J. N. Loughborough, or Moses Hull. "No one knows Michigan like John Byington" became a byword among believers.⁴

While Byington sometimes received reimbursement for his travel expenses, he never accepted a salary either from the Michigan Conference or the General Conference. Instead, income from his 99-acre farm, which annually produced 200 bushels of wheat and 250 bushels of corn, paid for his part-time ministry. But Ellen White wanted him to do full-time ministry. In June and July 1859, she sent Byington two letters rebuking him for his worldliness, lack of sacrifice, selfishness, his criticism of her husband, and his jealousy of Joseph Bates⁵

As the Byingtons' diaries reveal, John occasionally suffered from depression, coughing, a sore foot, malaria, and abscessed teeth, while Catharine was afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis and lameness.

General Conference President

Byington's experiences in New York as a religious and political organizer served him well in Michigan during the 1860s. Although he originally favored the name "Church of God," Byington accepted the consensus in 1860 that the name "Seventh-day Adventist" better reflected the Church's cardinal beliefs. That same year he also helped incorporate the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association. During 1861 and 1862 he organized more than twenty local churches in the state and helped form the Michigan Conference. In October 1862 he became an ordained minister of that Conference and was elected to the Michigan Conference Committee.

When the General Conference was formed in May 1863, John Byington was chosen as its first president when James White declined to serve for personal reasons. During his two one-year terms (1863–1865), Byington traveled hundreds of miles throughout Michigan and Indiana establishing churches, preaching, baptizing converts, ordaining deacons and elders, and visiting families in their homes. While many of his sermons and *Review* articles dealt with doctrines such as the Second Coming, the seven last plagues, the final judgment, and the sealing time, others focused on prayer, grace, salvation, and the blessed hope. Letters to the *Review* praised Byington for bringing unity, revival, and harmony wherever he went. In 1864 he was instrumental in securing

noncombatant status for Adventist men inducted into the army, first from U.S. Provost Marshall J. B. Fry (in August) and then from Michigan Governor Blair (in September). Many believed that Byington's calls for days of fasting and prayer hastened the end of the Civil War in 1865. John also chaired the 1865 General Conference session when James White, who had been elected as the next General Conference president, was too ill to attend.

Later Ministry

Ever a promoter of unity, in 1866 and again in October 1867 John Byington (and several others) signed two statements defending James and Ellen White against charges of financial mismanagement and apologizing for their faultfinding, lack of sympathy, prejudice, and past opposition to the Whites, promising to stand with them in the work.

When George and Martha (Byington) Amadon were expelled from the Battle Creek congregation during the "purge" of 1870, John and Catharine welcomed them into their home in Ceresco for several months until their membership was restored. Their hospitality, while appreciated, created some dietary conflicts, because George and Martha were strict vegetarians, while John and Catharine were not. John's diaries reveal that the family frequently ate beef, chicken, fish, and oysters and drank tea, coffee, cider, and sherry. This helps to explain why Byington, unlike Joseph Bates, wrote no sermons or articles on health reform. But when Bates died in 1872, John Byington became the oldest Adventist minister in the denomination.

During the 1870s, as the Michigan Conference renewed his ministerial credentials and the railroads granted him half-price fares, Byington continued his peripatetic ministry. Thanks in part to the labor provided by his grandchildren and hired helpers on the farm, he kept preaching part time. Although some of his *Review* articles (against croquet and short dresses) show his crotchety side, others (for example, on the necessity of prayer) reflect his piety. As their diaries attest, John and Catharine celebrated every New Year's Day by fasting and praying. When bad weather or physical infirmities prevented him from traveling, John studied his Bible, Ellen White's writings, and Wesley's sermons.

In May 1880, while plowing a field, John cut his foot so badly that it festered, leaving him lame for months. After several physicians prescribed unhelpful treatments, Byington went to Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852–1943) for surgery. Recognizing (at age 82) that his farming days were over, John sold the farm in November 1880 and in the spring of 1881 bought three houses (one for him and Catharine and two to rent) in Battle Creek. Now in his eighties, he spent his time doing good deeds for others and attending Sabbath school, church, prayer, social, testimony, quarterly, and Tract and Missionary Society services at the Dime Tabernacle. When invited, he preached at nearby Adventist churches and occasionally visited Methodist, Congregational, and Baptist churches. Between 1881 and 1886, Byington also wrote letters to all of his non-Adventist children and grandchildren, urging them to accept Jesus as their Savior before it was too late.

Catharine Byington, growing increasingly feeble in 1884, composed her final will and testament, giving her personal property to her four children and sixteen grandchildren. On February 20, 1885, after advising her husband to give up other cares and “visit the brethren,” Catharine spoke her last recorded words: “Come, my Saviour, come quickly!”⁶ She died on February 22, 1885, and was buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Battle Creek.

Following his wife’s wishes, John, now in his late eighties, continued his visitation ministry until he was confined to bed in November 1886. After drawing up his final will and planning his funeral, he reviewed his entire life, asked God for forgiveness of his sins, and wrote the final entry in his diary: “May I patiently endure!”⁷ John Byington died on January 7, 1887, at age 88, and was buried beside Catharine, his wife of sixty years, in Oak Hill Cemetery.

Contribution

While John Byington is remembered as the first president of the General Conference (1863–1865), many of his other contributions have been forgotten. Prior to his conversion to Sabbath-keeping Adventism in 1852, he played leading roles in reforming the Methodist Church, shaping the anti-slavery movement in America, promoting abolitionism through the Liberty and Free Soil parties, and helping fugitive slaves escape to Canada via the Underground Railroad. During his thirty-five years as a Seventh-day Adventist minister (1852–1887), Byington baptized hundreds of converts, established dozens of local churches, and helped to form the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, the Michigan Conference, and the General Conference, and participated in securing noncombatant status for Adventist inductees during the Civil War.

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NOTES

1. Jonathan Crowther, *A True and Complete Portraiture of Methodism: or the History of Wesleyan Methodism* (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, 1813), 231–234.
2. Brian E. Strayer, *John Byington: First General Conference President, Circuit-Riding Preacher, and Radical Reformer* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017), 80–86.
3. G. W. Amadon, “The Sickness and Death of Eld. John Byington,” *Adventist Review*, January 25, 1887, 58; Strayer, *John Byington*, 93.
4. Arthur W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1961), 1:222.
5. Ellen G. White to John Byington, June 21, 1859 and ca. June–July 1859, Letters 2 and 28, 1859, accessed May 3, 2018, egwwritings.org.
6. Uriah Smith, “Catharine Byington obituary,” *Adventist Review*, March 17, 1885, 175.
7. Strayer, *John Byington*, 265.

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