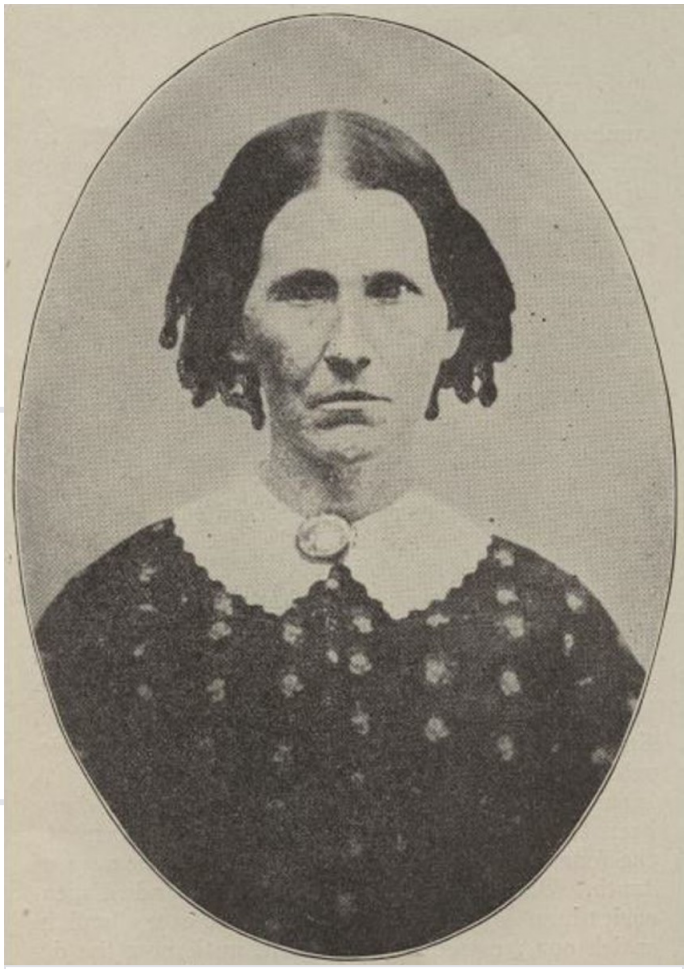
# Preston, Rachel Harris Oaks (1809-1868)

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Rachel Oaks Preston

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

Rachel Oaks Preston was a Seventh Day Baptist who introduced the seventh-day Sabbath to Advent believers, initiating a growing Sabbatarian Adventist movement.

## Early Years

Rachel was born on February 22, 1809, in Vernon, Vermont, to Captain Sylvanus Harris, Jr. and Nancy Johnson Harris.[1] Sylvanus may have named Rachel after his first wife, Rachel Peeter, who died in 1802 after only one and a half years of marriage.[2] The third of five children, Rachel's siblings were: Sylvanus Harris (1804-1857), Charles Harris (1806-1813), Rumina Dorman (1811-1875), and Charles Sidney Harris (1814-1895). The older Charles died at the age of six only four days after Rachel's fourth birthday.[3]

On October 25, 1824, Rachel, age 15, married Amory Oaks (1801-1835) from Marlow, New Hampshire.[4] Ten months later she gave birth to her first child: Rachel Delight Oaks (1825-1858), who would marry Cyrus K. Farnsworth (1823-1899) on June 14, 1847, at Worcester, Massachusetts.[5] The year after her daughter was born, Rachel accepted Jesus as her Savior, was baptized, and joined the Methodists.[6] She likely joined the Methodists of an adjoining town since Vernon never had a Methodist church.[7]

In 1825, the Erie Canal was completed, and stories spread of "cheap virgin land . . . east from central New York." The populations of Utica and Rome grew massively in the next decade. A later Seventh Day Baptist account suggests that Amory and Rachel Oaks followed many other families to the Utica and Rome area and settled there.[8] On September 19, 1834, they had a second daughter, Sarah (1834-1863), who married Ashley Wiswall in 1850. Historians have generally overlooked Rachel's second child because she was not listed in any church records, but several vital records attest to her existence.[9]

Less than seven months after Sarah's birth, Amory suddenly passed away on April 8, 1835. Since he had not left behind a last will, a surrogate court took up the case. The court appointed Caleb Green and another man as appraisers of Amory's estate, and made Rachel Oaks and Nathaniel Fitch the estate administrators.[10] The 1835 New York state census shows her "as a land owner with twelve acres but as having no livestock."[11] Merlin D. Burt notes that in Verona, New York (about 10 miles southwest of Rome), "Rachel was remembered as a widowed school teacher with some property" who "taught in various places, among them . . . Stacy Basin" (located about two miles west from the Seventh Day Baptist Church in Verona).[12]

## The Sabbatarian and Adventist Experience

Meanwhile, Rachel became interested in the subject of the seventh-day Sabbath but experienced a lot of opposition from her Methodist minister. Seeing her conviction on the subject, he finally acquiesced to her keeping the Sabbath if she would not separate from the Methodist Church.[13] She decided to part with the Methodists anyway and joined the Seventh Day Baptist Church at Verona on December 26, 1835.[14] Two years later, on January 20, 1838, her daughter Delight followed her mother's decision and joined the church as well.[15]

The Seventh Day Baptist Church at Verona took their responsibility towards widows and orphans seriously. The appraiser Caleb Green and Samuel Marsh, another Seventh Day Baptist from Verona, had entered an agreement with Rachel Oaks after the passing of her husband, yet by the summer of 1838, Marsh owed her $10 in rent and appeared to be unwilling to pay her the money. The church took up the case, and after extended and contentious debate, March was removed from membership. Years later the church readmitted him after he proved that he had paid the $10 to the church. In 1859 (after more than 20 years), the church finally forwarded the money to her. The church records show that Rachel was less concerned about the money than many people in the church who felt Marsh's obligation and the church's responsibility towards widows was a matter of principle.[16]

In September 1843, her daughter Delight, at age 18, went "to Washington, New Hampshire to take charge of a rural school" there. Rachel went to visit Delight at Washington later in the Fall of 1843, around Thanksgiving time, and together they attended the Christian Connexion church.[17] A large portion of the members of this church had embraced the Advent message and thus Christ's second coming likely was a frequent topic of discussion. While in Washington, Rachel and Delight accepted the belief in the soon second coming of Christ.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1843, Seventh Day Baptists felt a religious duty to share the Sabbath truth more broadly. The General Conference of Seventh Day Baptists called for a special day of prayer and fasting for November 1, and resolved to produce publications on the Sabbath to be circulated among other denominations, urging them to study the subject closely and see its importance.[18] The church at Verona responded positively to the call and resolved to follow suit.[19]

By early 1844, Rachel had moved to Washington to be closer to her daughter Delight.[20] Inspired by the recent activities of the Seventh Day Baptists, she brought their publications on the Sabbath along and endeavored for a while to share the Sabbath truth with the Advent believers in the Christian Connexion church. To her disappointment, though, the church members were interested more in the second coming of Jesus than in the Sabbath as the true Lord's day.

Rachel reportedly "kept tactfully but irrepressibly after Elder [Frederick] Wheeler," the Millerite Methodist minister who preached at the church.[21] At a quarterly meeting in the spring of 1844, Wheeler administered the communion and remarked that all those partaking in "the communion should be ready to follow Christ, and keep all of God's commandments."[22] A couple of days later, he met Rachel Oaks at the home of the family of William Farnsworth. She reminded Wheeler of his remarks and then told him, "I came near getting up in the meeting at that point . . . and saying something." She said, "I wanted to tell you that you would better set that communion table back and put the cloth over it until you begin to keep the commandments of God." Those words "cut him deeper than anything that he had ever had spoken to him," Wheeler later told another minister.[23] Returning home, Wheeler pondered the question and, soon convinced, began to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. He thus became the first Sabbatarian Adventist minister.[24]

Through Wheeler's efforts, another Millerite minister, the Freewill Baptist Thomas M. Preble, accepted the Sabbath in August 1844. Six months later, Preble sent to the editor of the *Hope of Israel* an exposition on the perpetuity of the Sabbath commandment, which was fully printed on February 28, 1845.[25] In the following weeks, he would reprint that article in pamphlet form,[26] which attracted the interest of various Millerites, among them Joseph Bates (1792-1872), a cofounder and early Sabbath theologian of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

For a while in 1844, however, Wheeler appeared to be the only fruit of Rachel's endeavors to share the Sabbath message. After the Great Disappointment of October 1844,[27] she presumed that they would rethink the matter and show more openness to the Seventh Day Baptist publications on the Sabbath doctrine, which she had shared with them. But she was again disappointed and saddened over this lack of interest.[28] Yet, sometime in late 1844 or early January 1845, her efforts to introduce the Sabbath to those Advent believers in the Washington church eventually paid off.[29] More than two decades later, she told Stephen N. Haskell that one Sunday during the service, a member got up and said he had been studying the Bible and was convinced that the seventh day of the week was the Sabbath instead of the first day, and that he was going to keep it. He was followed by another, and then another, until a small company took their stand to keep the seventh-day Sabbath.

The first members to profess their acceptance of the Sabbath were William Farnsworth (1807-1888) and his wife Sarah (1812-1855).[31] A week later, William's brother Cyrus Farnsworth (1823-1899), stated that he had embraced the Sabbath too,[32] and soon William's oldest son, John P. Farnsworth (1834-1919), joined the small group of Sabbath keepers as well.[33] Not long after, their parents, Daniel Farnsworth (1782-1864) and Patty Farnsworth (1785-1875), followed their sons' example.[34] Soon a dozen or more people were keeping the Sabbath as a result of Rachel Oaks' witness.[35] The church split over the matter and the Sabbath-keepers held their meetings in the homes of John Stowell and Cyrus Farnsworth (Rachel Oaks' son-in-law) for the next couple years.[36]

Less than five months after the Great Disappointment of October 1844, Rachel and her daughter Delight asked the Seventh Day Baptist Church in Verona to remove their names from the church record book.[37] At regular business meeting on March 20, 1845, "the requests of Sister Rachel Oakes [*sic*] and Delight Oakes [*sic*] were laid before the Church." After discussion, "it was Resolved that the clerk write and inform them that the Church cannot consistently grant them their request while they walk by faith and in obedience to the laws of God."[38] Their names remained on the membership roll, with the word "deceased" entered into the records upon receipt of information about their deaths. Thus, Rachel and her daughter never formally left the Seventh Day Baptist Church.[39]

## Changing Relationship With Seventh-day Adventism

In Washington, Rachel got to know the brickmaker or brick layer Nathan T. Preston (1814-1871)[40] and married him sometime between 1844 and 1847. During that time, she frequently heard people, such as Stephen Smith and Worcester H. Ball, talk against James and Ellen White and, as a result, she became gradually "cold in religion and prejudiced to some extent against the Testimonies, having never seen Bro[ther] and S[iste]r White."[41] Some of the locals presumed it was "due to the criticism against the Testimonies" that she "became somewhat indifferent to our church" and decided to relocate with her husband and her younger daughter Sarah to Worcester, Massachusetts.[42] It appears that, in 1856, Nathan Preston, for unknown reasons, rented for one year the parsonage of the Christian Society that had built and controlled the Christian Connexion church at Washington, New Hampshire.[43]

By 1860, Rachel and Nathan had nevertheless returned to the vicinity of Worcester, Massachusetts. At that time, and likely for the next couple of years, they hosted Rachel's aged parents.[44] About 1863 they all moved back to Vernon, Vermont. Her daughter Delight had passed away five years earlier at the age of 33, and now her second daughter Sarah also passed away at the age of 29.[45] Rachel's own health began to fail and she became "helpless."[46] That her own parents, who were already in their late seventies and early eighties, lived with them may not have brought much relief.[47] Her mother passed away in September 1864 and her father in November 1867.[48] Those closest to her—her first husband, her daughters, and her parents—were one after another disappearing from her life, certainly traumatic experiences that may have left her with a feeling of loneliness.

In late 1867, however, a friend sent her Ellen White's 80-page book *Testimony for the Church*, no. 13. While reading that book "her mind underwent a decided change."[49] On December 20-25, the Whites visited the Seventh-day Adventist Church at Washington and the meetings had an impressive spiritual effect on the believers and their children,[50] resulting in the conversion of about 16 young people.[51] The "Christmas revival" was significant since church members no longer gathered for worship and the church had fallen into disarray. This revival remained in the corporate memory as a wonderful awakening that "turn[ed] the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal 4:6). Even such a critical spirit as Worcester H. Ball (1825-1902) underwent a transformation and change of perspective on Ellen White.[52] When Rachel heard of the revival at the church "her heart . . . rejoice[d]."[53] On January 28, 1868, the *Review* printed a travel report by James White, in which he mentioned Rachel Preston very favorably, crediting her with providing the initial impetus to the growing Sabbatarian Adventist movement.[54]

Rachel was glad for the revival of her own spiritual experience and she stated that she was finally ready to die, giving expressions such as "Jesus is good" and "Jesus is my friend." On February 2, 1868, and thus only a few days after her mention in the *Review*, she passed away at the age of 59.[55] Although she was not a baptized member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the *Review* printed a sizable obituary of her, written by S. N. Haskell who had visited her shortly before and also credited her for introducing the Sabbath to the Adventists.[56] Her husband, Nathan T. Preston, passed away three years later, on January 19, 1871.[57] Both are buried at Tyler Cemetery in Vernon, Vermont.

## Contribution

Rachel Oaks Preston introduced the seventh-day Sabbath to Frederick Wheeler, who became the first Sabbatarian Adventist minister, and to a group of Millerites in Washington, New Hampshire, that became the first Sabbatarian Adventist congregation. Her humble efforts to share the Sabbath truth resulted in a growing movement of Sabbath-keepers around the world now known as the Seventh-day Adventists.

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3. "Sylvanus Harris," Tyler Cemetery, Vernon, Windham County, Vermont, Memorial No. 85213205, *Find A Grave*, accessed December 21, 2022, http://www.findagrave.com; "Charles Harris," Tyler Cemetery, Vernon, Windham County, Vermont, Memorial No. 85213234, *Find A Grave*, accessed December 21, 2022, http://www.findagrave.com; "Rumina Harris Dorman," Vermont, U.S., Vital Records, 1720-1908, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed December 22, 2022, http://ancestry.com; "Charles Sidney Harris," Tyler Cemetery, Vernon, Windham County, Vermont, Memorial No. 133923599, *Find A Grave*, accessed December 22, 2022, http://www.findagrave.com; Burt, "Rachel Oaks Preston," 1.

4. "Amory" is sometimes spelled "Amery" or "Emery," and "Oaks" is sometimes spelled "Oakes." Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988, digital image, "Amery Oaks," Ancestry.com, accessed December 21, 2022, http://ancestry.com; Vermont, U.S., Vital Records, 1720-1908, digital image, "Emery Oaks," Ancestry.com, accessed December 21, 2022, http://ancestry.com.

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6. S. N. Haskell, "Rachel Preston obituary," *ARH*, March 3, 1868, 190.

7. D. E. Robinson to Rochelle Philmon Kilgore, December 15, 1943, Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, MD.

8. Quoted in Burt, "Rachel Oaks Preston," 2; cf. Robinson to Kilgore, December 15, 1943.

9. "Sarah W. Oakes Wiswell," Wiswell Cemetery, Townshend, Windham County, Vermont, Memorial No. 116018734, *Find A Grave*, accessed December 22, 2022, http://www.findagrave.com; Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988, digital image, "Sarah Wiswell," Ancestry.com, accessed December 21, 2022, http://ancestry.com; 1850 U.S. census, Worcester Ward 3, Worcester County, Massachusetts, page 176A, roll M432_1009, digital image, "Sarah W. Oakes," Ancestry.com, accessed December 22, 2022, http://ancestry.com; Massachusetts, U.S., Marriage Records, 1840-1915, digital image, "Sarah W. Oakes," Ancestry.com, accessed December 22, 2022, http://ancestry.com.

10. Burt, "Rachel Oaks Preston," 2. That she was a widow before she moved to Washington, New Hampshire, is also evident from an entry for September 27, 1839, in the record book of the Seventh Day Baptist Church in Verona, which refers to her as "the Widow Rachel Oaks." *The Book of Records of the Sabbathkeeping Brethren in the Town of Rome and Verona, Containing Their Agreement or Covenant with Their Names and Ages*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (n.p.: n.p., 1811), entry for December 26, 1835, transcribed by Merlin D. Burt, WDF 3035 fld 1, Center for Adventist Research, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.

11. Cited in Burt, "Rachel Oaks Preston," 3.

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13. J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week*, 2nd ed. (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1873), 501; Haskell, "Rachel Preston obituary," 190.

14. *The Book of Records of the Sabbathkeeping Brethren in the Town of Rome and Verona*, vol. 1, entry for December 26, 1835; Burt, "Rachel Oaks Preston," 1.

15. *The Book of Records of the Sabbathkeeping Brethren in the Town of Rome and Verona*, vol. 1, entry for January 20, 1838; Burt, "Rachel Oaks Preston," 1.

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22. D. E. Robinson, "Early Sabbathkeeping in Washington, N.H. and Vicinity," ca. 1940, DF 188, Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, MD.

23. F. W. Bartle, quoted Spicer, "Our First Minister," 8.

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25. T. M. Preble, *Hope of Israel*, February 28, 1845, quoted in T. M. Preble, "Eld. Preble on the Sabbath," *ARH*, August 23, 1870, 74.

26. T. M. Preble, *Tract, Showing That the Seventh Day Should Be Observed as the Sabbath, Instead of the First Day; "According to the Commandment"* (Nashua, NH: Murray A. Kimball, 1845).

27. F. Wheeler, "Sarah Farnsworth obituary," *ARH*, August 7, 1855, 23; E. W. Farnsworth, "Symposium of Pioneers: Sabbath Afternoon, May 29," *ARH*, June 4, 1926, 1.

28. S. N. Haskell, “Our First Meeting House,” *General Conference Bulletin*, June 2, 1909, 290.

29. Frederick Wheeler, “Bro. Frederick Wheeler writes . . .,” *ARH*, December 1850, 16; James White, “A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Present Truth,” *ARH*, December 31, 1857, 61; Haskell, “Rachel Preston obituary,” 190; James White, “Eastern Tour,” *ARH*, January 28, 1868, 104; Farnsworth, “Symposium of Pioneers,” 1.

30. Haskell, “Our First Meeting House,” 290.

31. Farnsworth, “Symposium of Pioneers,” 1; E. W. Farnsworth, “William Farnsworth obituary,” *ARH*, February 19, 1889, 126; Wheeler, “Obituary: Sarah Farnsworth,” 23.

32. Harriet A. Farnsworth, “Cyrus Farnsworth obituary,” *ARH*, May 30, 1899, 350.

33. “John P. Farnsworth obituary,” *ARH*, January 16, 1919, 31.

34. C. K. Farnsworth, “Daniel Farnsworth obituary,” *ARH*, July 19, 1864, 63; D. A. Robinson, “Obituary: Patty Farnsworth,” *ARH*, May 20, 1875, 167.

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38. *The Book of Records of the Sabbathkeeping Brethren in the Town of Rome and Verona*, vol. 2, entry for March 20, 1845; also quoted in A. L. Davis to F. E. Froom, August 1, 1933, WDF 3035 fld 1, Center for Adventist Research, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI; and in Robinson to Rochelle Philmon Kilgore, December 15, 1943.

39. Davis to Froom, August 1, 1933.

40. Massachusetts, U.S., Death Records, 1841-1915, digital image, “Nathan T. Preston,” Ancestry.com, accessed December 22, 2022, http://ancestry.com.

41. Haskell, “Rachel Preston obituary,” 190; Burt, “Rachel Oaks Preston,” 4.

42. Robinson to Rochelle Philmon Kilgore, December 15, 1943; cf. Henry J. Howland, *Worcester Almanac, Directory, and Business Advertiser, for 1847* (Worcester, MA: H. J. Howland, 1847), 90; 1850 U.S. census, Worcester Ward 3, Worcester County, Massachusetts, page 176A, roll M432_1009, digital image, “Rachel Preston,” Ancestry.com, accessed December 21, 2022, http://ancestry.com.

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47. 1860 U.S. census, "Rachel Preston;" cf. Find A Grave, Tyler Cemetery, "Captain Sylvanus Harris, Jr."

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50. P. C. Rodman, "Report of Labors," *ARH*, January 14, 1868, 73; Haskell, "Obituary Notice: Rachel Preston," 190; cf. Robinson to Rochelle Philmon Kilgore, December 15, 1943.

51. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:653-661.

52. Mark Ford, *The Church at Washington, New Hampshire: Discovering the Roots of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 102-109.

53. Haskell, "Rachel Preston obituary," 190; cf. Robinson to Rochelle Philmon Kilgore, December 15, 1943.

54. James White, "Eastern Tour," 104.

55. Haskell, "Rachel Preston obituary," 190; "Rachel Harris Preston," Tyler Cemetery, Vernon, Windham County, Vermont, Memorial No. 76495075, *Find A Grave*, accessed December 21, 2022, http://www.findagrave.com.

56. Haskell, "Rachel Preston obituary," 190.

57. "Nathan T. Preston," Tyler Cemetery, Vernon, Windham County, Vermont, memorial no. 85213084, "Nathan T. Preston," *Find A Grave*, accessed December 21, 2022, http://www.findagrave.com.

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