

**THE FIRST CHURCH IN
PROVIDENCE, NOT
THE OLDEST OF THE
BAPTISTS IN AMERICA**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649191062

The First church in Providence, not the oldest of the Baptists in America by S. Adlam

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S. ADLAM

**THE FIRST CHURCH IN
PROVIDENCE, NOT
THE OLDEST OF THE
BAPTISTS IN AMERICA**

THE
FIRST CHURCH IN PROVIDENCE,
NOT THE
OLDEST OF THE BAPTISTS
IN AMERICA,

ATTEMPTED TO BE SHOWN

BY

S. ADLAM,

PASTOR OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN NEWPORT, R. I.

NEWPORT:

CRANSTON & NORMAN'S POWER PRESS.

1850.

US14384.20.69

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Edward Richardson,
Comptroller

The following pages owe their origin to a controversy going on, since 1847, between the churches of Providence and Newport as to priority of age.

Having in the latter part of 1849 become the pastor of the latter church, I found it on several accounts necessary to satisfy my mind where the truth lay. I therefore resolved to make as thorough an examination of the subject as my means, and opportunities, and abilities would allow.

When I commenced my researches, I had no doubt but the truth was with the Providence church; and no one can be more surprised than was I, at the result to which I came. Nor could I be satisfied till I had repeated the investigation a second, a third and a fourth time, and then showed the whole to gentlemen in whose judgment I placed great confidence, and heard from them that they could perceive no mistake.

For the sake of distinctness and ease of reference, I have divided what is said into sections, and placed the subject discussed in each section, at its head.

It was not till I had fully attained my result, that I became acquainted with the manuscript referred to and quoted in section IV. The reading of that manuscript removed every suspicion that I had erred.

Should any reply, let me remind them, that the whole argument is contained in section I. On that I rely; all the rest is intended to throw light upon and confirm that. Should I, therefore, be found to have erred (which I have earnestly endeavored to avoid) in any other part, my conclusions will remain untouched, unless that section be proved to be unsound.

I know of nothing that can be construed into a disrespect of the Providence church, except it be the notice I have taken of their Records; (by which I mean the Historic Sketch prefixed to them,) and I have done no more than to show that they cannot be relied on as valid historical testimony. No one now living

is responsible for them. I suppose that if a sketch were at present to be made by some of the able members of that church, it would not only differ from that in the Records, but would contradict them. Professor Knowles in his life of Roger Williams has pointed out some errors. Dr. Hague in his Historical Discourse, has on a most important and even vital point as far as our discussion is concerned, opposed them. Staples, though he has done it with a gentle hand, has alluded to the misconception concerning Thomas Olney. Professor Gammell, a member of that church, and one of the committee to prepare the document read to the Association, in his life of Roger Williams, is at entire variance with the Records concerning that distinguished man. Indeed any one who investigates facts for himself, will be convinced that on these records he can place no reliance as to what occurred before the time of Tillinghast; they are quite as likely to mislead as to guide. On this account, especially as our most popular historians rely on them as ultimate authority, I considered it my duty to show fully their inaccuracy.

It will soon be perceived that I write not for popular reading; but I appeal to men who can reason and reflect.

I wish to state distinctly that one question, and that alone is here discussed. I enquire not who in America were the first persons baptized, where, or by whom; nor when any other church was constituted. The question is, "which is the oldest Baptist Church in America? Is it the existing Newport, or the existing Providence Church?" It is not for another, but for itself the Providence church contends; the church in Newport does the same. Simple and obvious as this remark may appear, it is not without importance in this discussion.

I have added an appendix, in which I have more fully explained some things connected with the subject on which I have treated, but which it would not be well to consider in the body of the work.

I now leave what I have written to calm, reflecting, impartial men; their verdict will at last prevail, and to it I cheerfully submit.

November 22, 1850.

I.
THE PRESENT CHURCH IN PROVIDENCE, A SECED-
ING, FROM AN OLDER CHURCH; ITS TRUE DATE,
AND FOUNDERS.

Four things are claimed by the church in Providence; that Roger Williams was its founder and first pastor; that it was constituted in 1639; before any other in the State; and that it is the oldest of the Baptists in America. All this, with the exception of Roger Williams being its founder and first pastor, is inscribed on its bell; and also on a tablet in its Meeting House.—Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, have read this tablet, and have supposed it to state undoubted facts. But was it constituted in 1639? Was it the first in the State? Is it the oldest of the Baptists in America? And was Roger Williams its founder and first pastor? Will a thorough examination sustain one of these positions? Let the evidence that follows decide.

Staples, in his *Annals of Providence*, says: "There were two Baptist Churches in Providence, as early as 1652; one of the six principle, and the other of the five principle Baptists. This appears from a manuscript diary kept by John Comer, a Baptist Preacher in Newport. It states that one of the members of the First Baptist Church in Newport, "came to Providence, and received imposition of hands from William Wickenden, pastor of a church there lately separated from the church under Thomas Olney," and that Mr. Wickenden and Gregory Dexter, returned to Newport with him, and that the same ordinance was administered to several others who in 1656, withdrew from the first church in Newport, and formed a new church there, &c." p 410.

Comer, in his manuscript, spells Wickenden's name, as it was probably pronounced, *Wigginton*; and his exact words are,—
"Mr. William Vaughn, finding a number of baptists in the town

of Providence, lately joined together in special church covenant, in the faith and practice, and under the inspection of Mr. William Wigginton, being heretofore members of the church under Mr. Thomas Olney of that town, he, i. e., Mr. William Vaughn went thither in the month of October 1652, and submitted thereto (to the imposition of hands) upon which he returned to Newport accompanied with Mr. William Wigginton, and Mr. Gregory Dexter, &c."

Callender says, "About the year 1653 or 54, there was a division in the Baptist Church, at Providence, about the right of laying on of hands, which some pleaded for as essentially necessary to church communion, and the others would leave indifferent. Hereupon they walked in two churches, one under Mr. C. Browne, Mr. Wickenden, &c., the other under Mr. Thomas Olney." p 114.

Backus writes, "Mr. Thomas Olney, who had been a member of the Congregational Church in Salem, but left them and came to Providence in 1638, was the next pastor of this Baptist Church (founded by Roger Williams) until his death in 1682. But a division arose in the church in 1652, about the laying on of hands upon every member of the church after baptism. Mr. William Wickenden was a chief leader in that part of the church in Providence which held to laying on of hands upon each member, which they supposed to be intended in the 6th chap. of Hebrews; and he was an esteemed minister therein, until he died Feb. 23, 1660. Vol. 3, p 217. Again. "Mr. Thomas Olney, senior, also died this year (1682.) He was next to Mr. Williams in the pastoral office at Providence, and continued so to his death, over that part of the church, who are called five principle baptists, in distinction from those who parted from their brethren about the year 1653, under the leading of elder Wickenden, holding to the laying on of hands upon every church member." Vol. 1, p 505.

Before I make any remarks on what has been adduced, I wish to show that the above statements are so far above contradiction, that they have been in their general features endorsed by the Providence church itself. Dr. Hague, late pastor of that church, in his "Historical Discourse," prepared with great care, and

received with uncommon satisfaction and respect by his people, does not deny a single statement that Comer, or Callender, or Backus has made, but as far as he refers to this subject, harmonizes with them.

Speaking, in order, of the pastors of the church, when coming to Wickenden, p. 95—he says, “with his name is connected our first intelligence of the rise of a controversy, which was long agitated in this town, and throughout the commonwealth”; and then discussing the subject to which he alludes, viz., the laying on of hands, he quotes from Comer thus: “In 1652, Rev. William Vaughn, of Newport, embraced this view, and hearing that a church had been formed in Providence on this basis, under the care of Rev. Mr. Wickenden, he repaired thither, and having received the rite himself, obtained the aid of Mr. Wickenden in forming a similar body at Newport.” Reviewing the ministry of Dexter, first the associate and then the successor of Wickenden, Dr. Hague observes; “when Mr. Vaughn visited Providence in 1652, in order to procure the aid of Mr. Wickenden in forming a church which should hold the laying on of hands as a divine ordinance, Mr. Dexter accompanied them to Newport, and seems to have taken a part in that service; from which we may infer that he had united with those who had formed a separate church here under Mr. Wickenden.” p. 98.

These statements prove that as early as 1652, 53 or 54, two distinct baptist churches existed in Providence; that they were not only distinct bodies, but of different orders; one a six, the other a five principle baptist church; that the six principle was under the care of Wickenden, Browne and Dexter, while the five principle church was under the charge of Thomas Olney.

They also prove, that Olney's was the original, and Wickenden's, Browne's and Dexter's, six principle, the seceding church.

Two things show that the existing, is the seceding church.—1st. Every writer, including the records, mentions Browne, Wickenden and Dexter as former pastors of that church. 2d. The present church, from 1652 until 1770, was known only as a six principle, while Olney's was the five principle church.