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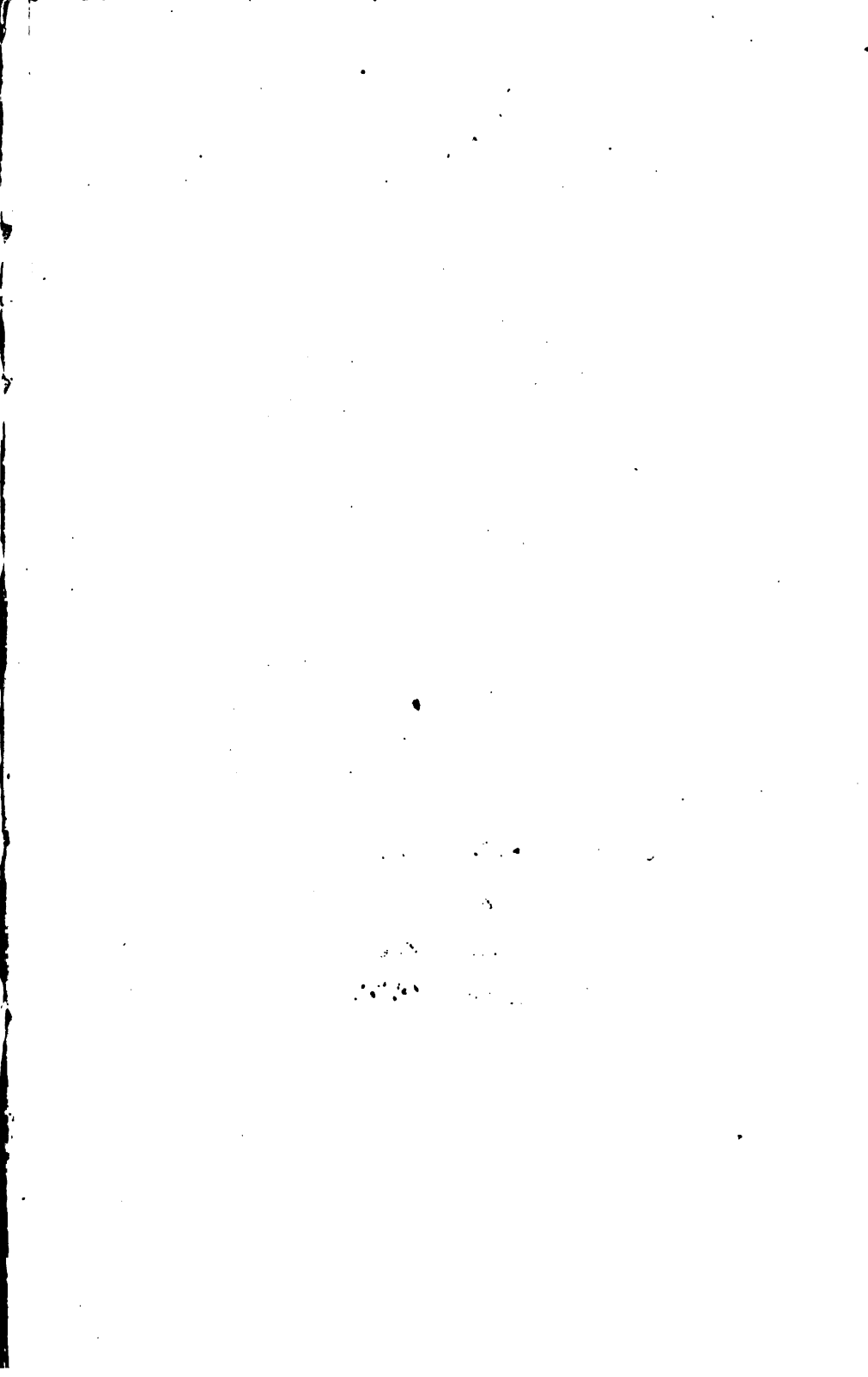


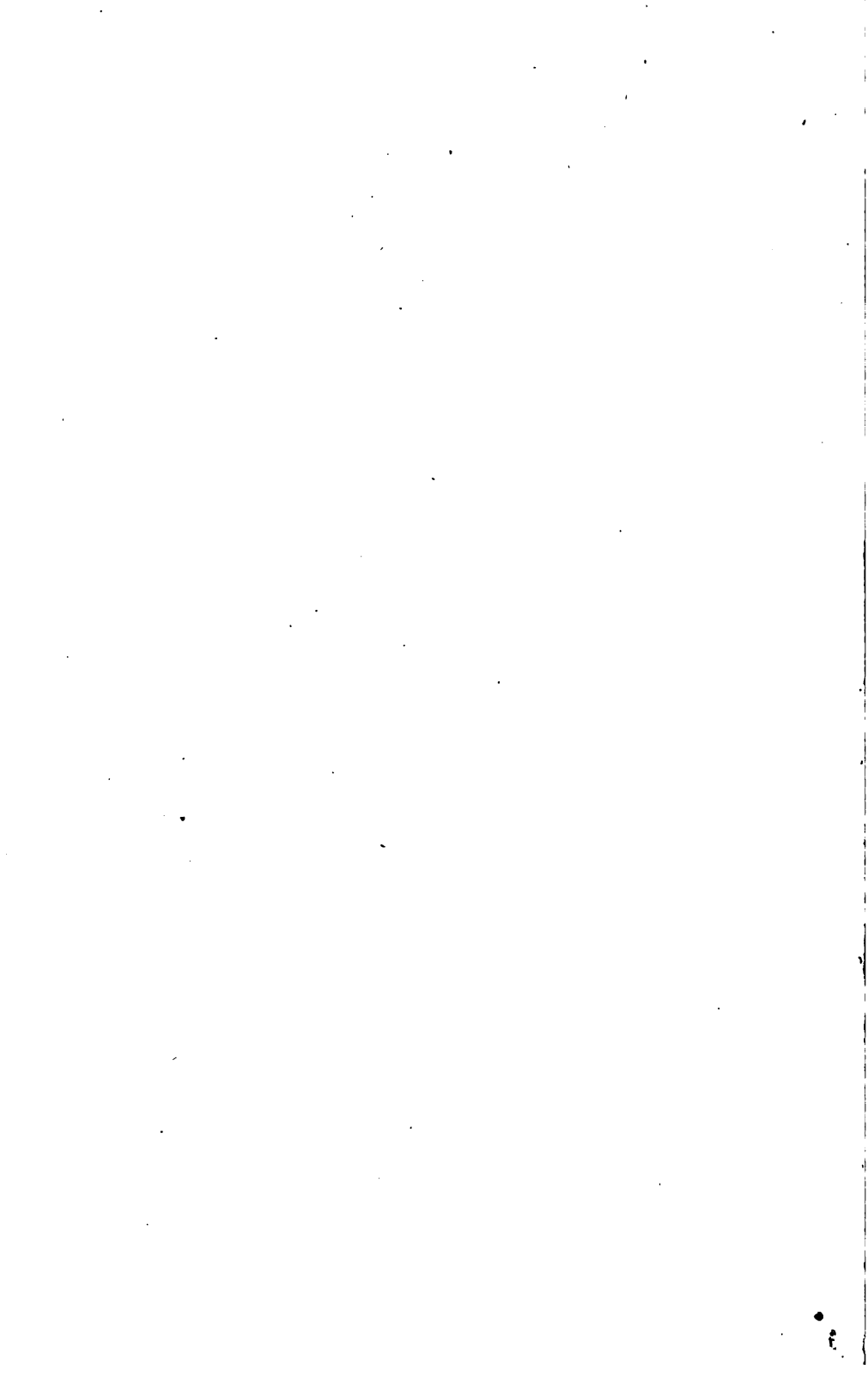
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THE  
**FIRST CHURCH IN PROVIDENCE,**  
NOT THE  
**OLDEST OF THE BAPTISTS**  
**IN AMERICA,**

ATTEMPTED TO BE SHOWN

BY

**S. ADLAM,**

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

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**NEWPORT:**  
CRANSTON & NORMAN'S POWER PRESS.  
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1250 Dec 18 Lett to  
Edward Richardson,  
Baltimore

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.

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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, 1669. 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.

From this it follows; that the existing church in Providence was not founded in 1639, but in 1652; it was not the first in the State, for it came out from an older church; it is not the oldest of the Baptists in America, for the Newport Church was founded eight years before; and so far from Roger Williams being its founder and first pastor, he was in England when it was founded; and thirteen years before, he had ceased to be a Baptist.

It also follows, that the time when Roger Williams was baptized, has nothing to do in determining the age of the present church.

## II.

### RELIABLE TRADITION HARMONIZES WITH THE PRECEDING VIEW.

That no opportunity might be afforded for weakening the foregoing conclusion, I have kept strictly within the bounds of the highest documentary evidence; I now add, that tradition of the most reliable character, generally, if not universally, as far as the founders and first pastors of the church are concerned, agrees with the preceding view.

Stephen Hopkins, signer of the Declaration of Independence, grandson of Wickenden, uniformly affirmed that Wickenden was the first elder of the existing church, and asserted this in his "History of Providence," published in 1765. Moses Brown, that venerable Nestor of Providence, as he is called by Knowles, always held that his ancestor, Chad Brown, was the first elder of the Providence Baptist Church. John Angel, born in 1691, claimed the same honor for his grandfather, Gregory Dexter.

Nor is there any discrepancy in these claims. When the present venerable President of the Rhode Island Historical Society, John Howland, Esq., now over ninety years of age, told Moses Brown, with whom he was intimate sixty or seventy years ago, of the claims of Stephen Hopkins, which seemed to conflict with what he affirmed, Moses replied, "that there was no contradiction, for they were probably both elders at the same time." A statement undoubtedly true; and the same may be said of Dexter, co-temporary with them both. The fact appears to be thus: C. Brown, Wickenden and Dexter, in withdrawing from Olney's

and setting up the present church, labored for awhile together.— Chad Brown seems to have died first, Wickenden next, and Dexter, living to a great age, survived both. Under these circumstances it would be natural for the descendants of each, as they did, to claim for their progenitors the honor of being the first elders of that church.

Nor were the immediate descendants of these men the only ones of this opinion; in the early days of Providence it was the general if not the universal belief.

Callender in 1738 says, "The most ancient inhabitants now alive, some of them above eighty years old, who personally knew Mr. Williams, and were well acquainted with many of the original settlers, never heard that Mr. Williams formed the Baptist Church there, but always understood that Mr. Brown, Mr. Wickenden or Wigginton, Mr. Dexter, Mr. Olney, Mr. Tillinghast, &c., were the first founders of that church." \*

This shows that the general opinion of Roger Williams being the founder and first pastor of that church is a modern theory; the farther you go back the less generally is it believed; till coming to the most ancient times, to the men who knew Williams, they are such entire strangers to it, that they never heard that he formed the Baptist Church there. The first, and the second, and the third and almost the fourth generation must pass away, before men can believe that any others than Wickenden, Brown, &c., were the founders of that church. Two other things deserve a passing notice: 1st, The college in 1770 was built on its present site, "because it was the home lot of Chad Brown, the first minister of the Baptist Church"; † and 2d, On the bell and on the tablet Roger Williams is not mentioned as the founder of the church. There is reason to believe that if an attempt had been made to do it, it would have been stoutly resisted by many in that day; and even by some of the leading men in the building of the house. Indeed there are many of the most aged and well informed men of Providence at this day, who contend that Roger Williams was not the founder of that church. All this shows that

\* See note, appendix A.

† Howland in Knowles' life of Roger Williams, p. 174. Note.



tradition agrees with the documentary evidence before adduced. And yet all depends upon the founders and first pastors of the church; for Williams' church was founded in 1639, but Chad Brown's, Wickenden's and Dexter's not till 1652. The mistake lies in the existing church, taking not its own, but another's date.

### III.

#### THE OLD CHURCH, AND THE RELATION OF THE EXISTING CHURCH TO IT.

Having shown that the present separated from the old five principle church in the year 1652, we feel some interest to enquire concerning the fate of the original body.

Comer, Callender and Backus all agree that it remained under the care of Thomas Olney. As there is no difference of opinion on this, I shall only make one quotation, and that from Backus, already given. "Mr. Thomas Olney, senior, 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, &c." Vol. 1, p. 505.

A melancholy interest invests the last notices we have of this ancient church. It continued till early in the last century, when it became extinct, leaving no records, and but few events in its history behind. The fullest information of it I have found is in a note by Callender, on the 115 p. of his discourse. Speaking of this church, he adds below, "This last continued till about twenty years, when, becoming destitute of an elder, the members were united with other churches"; and further adds, "At present there is some prospect of their re-establishment in church order."

This was written in 1738. The church had then been extinct about twenty years; that is, it lost its visibility about 1718.—Morgan Edwards says, that the church under Olney continued till 1715. So that it continued after the division in 1652 for more than sixty years, when, discouraged, they scattered, never

to be united again. And thus passed away the original church, and the waves of time have almost obliterated its remembrance from the minds of men. Callender, indeed, thought when he wrote that it might be re-established, and in this he would have rejoiced as it would have afforded him a church that would hold communion with him, and with the people under his care; but he was disappointed, and for more than an hundred and thirty years the old church in Providence is among the things that were.

After this review, what are we to understand Dr. Hague to refer to (p. 99) when he says, that "the breach which then (1652) arose out of the controversy about laying on of hands as a divine rite, was afterwards healed?" How was it healed? By whom? And on what conditions? Did Wickenden's church ever give up its visibility, or merge itself into any other body? From the time of its formation in 1652, till under Dr. Manning 1770, did it not continue, strictly, by profession and in fact, a six principle church? And when an attempt was made during his ministry to relax somewhat the stringency of the six principles, was it accomplished without great difficulty, and did it not cost a division? It was not till 1791, that the church clearly decided to admit as members those who did not hold the six principles; nor till 1808, that these sentiments were formally given up.

Dr. Hague's language seems to imply, that the two churches came together and formed but one. No such an event can I trace in the history of either church. For more than sixty years they existed side by side, without once, as far as I know, having communed together. And as to the existing church, for more than a hundred years, it is not too much to say, that it was in its communion, among the strictest of the strict; nor do I know of an instance, during that period, of an attempt to relax the vigor of their practice without producing a re-action, and drawing the bounds of church fellowship within narrower limits.

It sometimes happens that when a church is reduced low and is in distress, another will come to its aid, but the old Providence church after having struggled for existence for more than sixty years, died unpitied and unwept. Has any one a right to take her date, and claim her founder? I trow not. The only place

for the inscription "This church was founded A. D. 1639," is the grave of Roger Williams' church.

## IV

#### ANCIENT HISTORY SUSTAINS THE CLAIMS OF THE NEWPORT CHURCH.

We have found that the proper date of the Providence church is not 1639, but 1652, and thus it cannot be the oldest of the baptists in America. We now observe, that ancient history ascribed this priority as to age to the church at Newport.

Comer, the first, and for the early history of our denomination, the most reliable of writers, ascribes distinctly and repeatedly this priority to the Newport church. He had formed the design, more than a hundred and twenty years ago, of writing the history of the American Baptists; and in that work, which he only lived to commence, but which embraces an account of this church, he says in one place, That it is the first of the Baptist denomination. And closing his history of it says. "Thus I have briefly given some account of the settlement and progress of the First Baptist church on Rhode Island in New England and the first in America."

This was written about 1730: and to those acquainted with Comer nothing need be said of the value of this testimony.—For others I will extract from Benedict a brief notice of his character. He "began his education at Cambridge, but finished it at New Haven." He "bid fair to be one of the most eminent ministers of his day; his character was unspotted and his talents respectable and popular; he had conceived the design of writing the history of the American Baptists, and for the purpose of forwarding it travelled as far as Philadelphia, [a great undertaking at that day] opened a correspondence with persons in the different colonies, and also in England, Ireland, &c.

This excellent man, who took unwearied pains to procure for his history the most correct information, was especially distinguished for the extreme accuracy of his dates; was, when he wrote the above, himself a six principle baptist, was intimately

acquainted with the church at Providence, and had advantages for knowing its early history, that no other historian has since possessed.

From the way in which he asserts it, the priority of the Newport church must have been a universally conceded fact. He was careful to excess, not to record as certain, that on which any suspicion rested; and yet this father of American baptist history, whose veracity has never been questioned, with 1644 as the acknowledged date of the Newport church, states that in age it is prior to any other baptist church in America. It is true, and I was sorry to see it, some later hand has added in a note, "Excepting that of Providence." Who wrote this I will not say, but no one should touch Comer's writings, unless he is a more reliable witness, than that pains-taking and impartial man.

Besides his general carefulness, he was, when he wrote the above, on the most favorable terms with the Providence church, while a difficulty had occurred between him and the Newport church which caused him the most painful feelings. While Pastor of that church he urged upon them the imposition of hands with considerable earnestness, which brought on discussion and alienation, till at last a separation took place, when he immediately passed under the imposition of hands and became the pastor of a six principle church. It is true that the breach was afterwards healed, and the account of the reconciliation, the church permitted him to make; the last of course of his valuable entries in our records. And though the separation was unpleasant, Comer's name is still held in affectionate remembrance by the church.

Now it was while suffering from the above cause, when, if ever, he was under temptation to suppress the truth, that he most unhesitatingly affirms the Newport church to be the first of the Baptists in America. He was, however, above temptation to pervert on any occasion the truth; and he must have known that what he wrote was not only correct, but it was at that time generally, if not universally acknowledged to be so. He makes no exceptions to his remark, and he was too well acquainted with the history of the church in Providence to except that; for he

well knew that it was not formed till 1652, eight years after that in Newport. \*

Should it appear strange, that if the claim of the Newport church was well founded it should suffer it to be taken away, and not reclaimed till within a few years; the solution is plain.

Soon after the church at Providence had affixed to itself a wrong date, the war of the Revolution came on; and in that great national crisis, no place suffered more than Newport. It was early taken and long held by the British forces; the property of its citizens was taken; its commerce crippled; its merchants, distinguished for enterprise, intelligence and wealth, fled, never to return. Amid the general distress none suffered more than the First Church. Its pastor was forced from his charge; its members were scattered; its sanctuary, dedicated by the sainted and talented Callender, and where with so much sweetness he had preached the gospel, was seized, desecrated, mangled, for the use of the British soldiers: and when at last, a few returned and looked on the desolation of their beloved Zion, they wept; they were poor, long had they to struggle even for existence; and probably knew not, or thought not, that their birthright was about to be taken from them. A series of events occurred that left not the church at liberty to put forth her appeal for that distinction which she so fairly deserves, and which at first, we doubt not, every church freely accorded to her. But still the members felt, and with them the Island at large, an assurance that nothing could shake, that it was this church which first in America, raised aloft the baptist standard, and that its founder and first members toiled and suffered, and knew what prison walls and scourges were, before our sister church at Providence had breathed the breath of life. Nor did they doubt but at last they could make it appear. Dates they knew somewhere or somehow were wrong; and suspected their own; and while looking over the family title deeds to verify or correct theirs, they found that in some way or other their sister had mistaken hers.

\* See note.

### SOURCE OF PREVAILING ERRORS, HOPKINS, CHURCH RECORDS.

The church at Providence never has had any creed, or any covenant ; till the year 1700 it had no meeting-house ; but in fine weather worshipped in a grove, and when inclement, in private houses ; nor till the year 1775 had it any regular records.— Can we be surprised, that in tracing the history of such a body, a hundred years after its origin, unless ancient writers are carefully studied, that material errors will be made ?

Those who first in modern times (I mean within the last hundred years) undertook to write concerning the Providence church, though excellent men in other respects, were sadly unqualified for their work. The days of Comer and of Callender had passed away. It seems as though between 1760 and 80 baptist history in Providence underwent a total eclipse. Different persons and churches were strangely jumbled together ; and as the result of this confusion, the present church assumed a position it did not before hold, and to which by right, it has not the shadow of a claim.

Stephen Hopkins, in 1765, is the first I can discover who assigned to the present church a date earlier than 1652 ; and he endeavored to unite the impossible conditions of the true founder and this early date. The claims for his grandfather Wickenden, the honor of being its first elder, and in this he was correct ; but he committed a grave mistake in attributing by implication to Wickenden the baptism of those who were baptized in 1639 or 38 ; an honor that belongs indisputably to Roger Williams.— Succeeding writers saw that Hopkins' early date must be given up, if Wickenden were retained as the first pastor ; and, themselves misled, they adopted the erroneous date, and pushing aside its true founder, Hopkins' grand-father, they put Roger Williams in his place. And thus by two errors, one built on the other, Roger Williams is made the founder and first pastor of a church with which we know not that he ever worshipped, or had the least sympathy, and which did not even begin to exist till

thirteen years after he had ceased to be a baptist; and that church has been led to assume a distinction which belongs to another.

It would be unnecessary to point out in detail the errors of each writer, after Stephen Hopkins. The way is the same in all.— They confound Roger Williams's with the present church; and thus carry back its date to thirteen years before it began to exist.

The errors and misconceptions arising therefrom are seen in a striking manner in the Records of the Providence church.— And as these records have, by being published, become public property, as they are appealed to by our most widely read historians, and as upon them ultimately must rest the claims of the Providence church, we shall examine what reliance can be placed upon them.

That the author or compiler of these records was honest, I doubt not; but that he possessed the information, the ability for patient research, and the discrimination necessary for a historian, I cannot believe. Take as examples the following serious errors :

So little did he know of the true origin of that church whose history for more than a hundred years he undertook to compile, that he not only makes Roger Williams to be its first pastor, but represents that he was its pastor about four years; when it is well known that he was a baptist only four months! After he left the baptists, Roger Williams lived forty-three years, and yet from these records you would not suspect, but he was a baptist to the day of his death. After being a baptist four months, Williams denied that there was any true ministry or any true church; and yet in these records, he is represented at the end of four years as resigning his pastoral office to Brown and Wickenden!

This specimen would be enough to satisfy any who were seeking the truth; but proceed, and mark the short but very inaccurate account of Thomas Olney. That I may not be charged with unfairness or misrepresentation I will quote it entire. "Rev. Thomas Olney succeeded (Gregory Dexter) to the pastoral office. He was born at Hertford, in England, about the year 1631, and came to Providence in 1654; but when baptized or

ordained is not known. He was the chief who made a division about laying on of hands. He and others withdrew and formed a separate church, but it continued only a short time. He died June 11, 1722, and was buried in his own field."

Difficult would it be in the same amount of language to find so much misconception and error as here. Never should Thomas Olney, to whom justice has not yet been done, have been spoken of thus. The writer doubtless intended to be correct; but so little did he know of history, that he confounded two individuals, probably father and son, together. If he alludes to the son; then it was not in his, but in his father's day, that the division occurred. If he alludes to the father, then he died, not in 1722, but forty years before, in 1682. This confusion of persons and dates, would invalidate any testimony. But this is not all. Olney is placed as the successor of Brown, Wickenden and Dexter. In the ministry he preceded them all; and never was pastor of the church which they set up. The records say, that he was the chief who made the division; and that he and others with him withdrew and formed a separate church. It was Wickenden and his associates that went off; and even Dr. Hague says, it was they who formed the separate church. The records say, that he came to Providence in 1654; he was Town Treasurer of that place in 1639. But I forbear. It may be said, that the records speak not of the father, but of the son. Then where is the evidence that the Olney who died in 1722, was pastor of Wickenden's church after Dexter's death; that he made a division about the laying on of hands; that he withdrew and formed a separate church? Is there a single ancient writer that has recorded it, or alluded to it? And if the son be alluded to, where, in giving an account of baptist ministers in Providence, is the father alluded to, that ancient man in whose day a division did take place; and who saw in 1652 his church receive such a wound, that after sixty years struggling for existence, it at last expired?

Look also at Chad Brown; he is made pastor of the church, ten years before it began to exist!

But I will pursue this subject no further. What is the value



of records like these? And yet it is by these records, and documents like them, that the Providence church carries its date back to 1639, claims to be the first in the State, and the oldest of the baptists in America.

We have seen in section I., how completely history refutes the claims of that church; but, if possible, the records on which they rely refutes them more completely still.

Thinking men will be ready to doubt, if records so prepared, are the highest authority on which grave historians rest in giving an account of that church, and on which that church's peculiar claims depend. But hear what Benedict, who well knows the facts, in 1848 says. Closing, in his history, his notice of this church, he observes, "My present historical details are taken partly from my first volume, and partly from Hague's Historical Discourse, delivered in 1839, at the expiration of two hundred years from the founding of the church. † *"But the church records are the only source of information to us all."* Is it so?—Is it by records like these that the ancient, and in her early days, when she stood all alone, suffering church at Newport, is to be disrobed of her distinction, and another that did not begin to be, till she had endured fine, imprisonment and scourging for the baptist cause,—is it by records like these, that the church in Providence claims to be the first in the State and the oldest of the Baptists in America? Then let the present generation, and let posterity know on what these claims rest. The claims and the records are of equal value; they are both alike.

† The two hundred years will not be complete till 1852.

## VI.

## CONCLUSION.

My investigation is brought to a close. I have pursued it fearlessly; I hope fairly. The time has fully come, when the errors that have produced a most disastrous effect upon the general history of our denomination, should, with a faithful but truthful hand, be laid bare. Ancient authors should again be heard, and modern misconception and confusion of thought should resign their rule. Little, when I commenced my inquiries, did I anticipate my result. I expected that with great plainness of speech, (the only thing allowable in a discussion where truth is at stake,) I should have to show to the Newport church, the unsoundness of its claims. I should not have spoken as I have, had I not surveyed, as far as I could, the entire field. I am earnest, but it is the earnestness of conviction; nor have I ventured upon a single position without probing it to the foundation, and enquiring, if it can be successfully assailed. And happy am I, that I have been speaking of a church that has so many members, able, if I have committed mistakes, to detect and expose them. If I have not been thorough in my examination; if I have misquoted or misrepresented any author; or if I have passed by, or suppressed any ancient document, or kept back any circumstance that would place this subject in a different light, they will know it. If in 1652 there were not in Providence two churches, one a five, and the other a six principle church; if theirs was not the seceding, and Olney's the original body; if the old church did not, about the year 1715, die out; if tradition does not mention Brown, Wickenden, &c., and not Roger Williams as the founders of the present church; if there is not, even to this day, in Providence, among some of its oldest and best informed inhabitants, a conviction which nothing can shake, that Roger Williams was not the founder of their church; if the earliest history does not unhesitatingly assign priority of age to the church at Newport; if the records of the Providence church can be vindicated; if the date 1639 does not belong to another body, and not to themselves; and if all their claims are not based on

misconception and error, they can make it appear. The documents on which I have relied are at their command, within the sound of their bell; if not immediately under their hand. But if they cannot disprove what I have said, (and I think they cannot,) then, if there be a single truth on which we can rely, the Providence church was not founded in 1639, but in 1659; it was not the first in the State, nor is it the oldest in America; and if there is a church to which that distinction belongs of right, and fairly beyond dispute, it is the Newport church.

## WHICH WAS THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH ESTABLISHED IN AMERICA ?

It will be seen, that I have not claimed in the preceding discussion, all that belongs to the Newport church. It is not only, according to early history, the oldest, but also the First Baptist Church established in America. My reason for not insisting on this before, was the desire to keep one question steadily before the mind ; and that being settled, we could better proceed. The question as to which is the oldest church having been discussed, we can now attend to that at the head of this section.

I can see no evidence that Roger Williams, in the ordinary acceptance of the term, established a baptist church in Providence. When he was baptized, he doubtless intended to do this ; but he was not the man, and the attempt was a failure.

That the church which he began to collect fell to pieces soon after he left them, is what we should expect ; and is, as far as I can learn, the uniform declaration of writers of that day.

It has been the practice with baptist writers, to put this down as pedo-baptist misrepresentation ; but on what ground I know not. They gave a true statement of him and his views ; viz, that after being a baptist four months, he renounced his baptism, the ministry, and the church ; believing that there was no true visible church, no true ministry, nor any one that had a right to administer ordinances. If they spake truthfully concerning him, why should they be doubted when they speak concerning his church ? If they thought his church did exist, they must have known that it would be a standing monument, known and read of all men, against their declarations.

Look at the circumstances also. Here was a church gathered by one, in every respect their leader, the only learned man among them, and whose influence over them at that time was immense ; as soon as he was baptized and had baptized them, he began to doubt the propriety of the act. And in the space of four months had fully made up his mind, that there was neither a true ministry, nor true church on earth ; a conviction so strong, that he never wavered in it for the forty-three years of his after

life. What could be expected of these brethren, who had not the light which we enjoy, but were just emerging out of darkness, themselves as well as their leader having been bred in the belief, that a regular succession from the Apostles downward was necessary to a true church and a true ministry? To persuade us that they would, under these circumstances, continue together as a church, requires the most undoubted evidence; but instead of this, the evidence is the contrary way.

The perplexity into which these brethren were thrown for want of a valid administrator is seen by an account introduced by Backus. They heard that the Queen of Hungary, or some in those parts, had a register of a regular succession from the Apostles, and they thought of sending Mr. Thomas Olney into that country for it.

It is well that a baptist writer has recorded this; for of all the strange things recorded by pedo-baptists concerning our brethren at Providence, this is the strangest of all. Send to the Queen of Hungary or some in those parts, for a register of a regular succession from the Apostles, that they might be able to establish a valid baptist church! It shows how much Roger Williams had terrified them as to succession. I do not blame them. They were simple-hearted, honest, conscientious men, willing to do all they could, and to go anywhere, so as they may obey the Savior; but they were fettered with what does not trouble us, with the idea of "succession." And if any are disposed to smile at these unlettered baptists, let them remember, that in 1850, there are thousands of learned men bound hand and foot, and who scarcely dare think their own thoughts, on account of the "succession." These Providence baptists showed not a little vigor in emancipating themselves as soon as they did. But it is too much to believe, without strong evidence, that they could stand the shock of Williams' arguments, so as to keep as a church together. It must have appeared like presumption for them, all lay brethren, to attempt to administer ordinances, when Williams, their pastor, declared that no man without a special commission from heaven had a right to do it. And as to Williams ordaining any one during the four months that he was a baptist, and while his mind

was so distressingly agitated, it is too absurd for a moment to be believed.

There is one writer whose testimony is of the highest value on this subject; I allude to Thomas Lechford, who was in New England from 1637, till about August 1641; and among other places, he visited Providence; somewhere I judge about the close of 1640, or the beginning of 41. He enquired with great diligence into the ecclesiastical affairs of the country, and gave a faithful account. Against the Baptists he had no special prejudices, more than against the Congregationalists, for he was an Episcopalian. But whatever were his own convictions, I have gained in many respects, a more exact view of New England during these four years from him, than from any other person.—When speaking of Providence he says: “At Providence, which is twenty miles from the said Island (Rhode Island, which he had also visited), lives Master *Williams*, and his company, of divers opinions; most are Anabaptists; they hold there is no true visible Church in the *Bay*, nor in the world, nor any true ministry.”

Mark this account. It is from an eye-witness, about a year and half after *Williams* renounced baptism, churches, ministry and all. It is from a discriminating writer; he does not say that all were Anabaptist, but that most were. He has not a word of reproach to utter against them, or *Williams*. He tells things just as they are. Providence at that time also was small, and had but few inhabitants, so that he could easily become acquainted with them. Now the opinion of these Anabaptists at Providence was, that there was no true visible church in the *Bay*, nor in the world, nor any true ministry. Of course they could not have had a church.—*Lechford*, then, a purely unexceptionable witness, confirms what others have said, that *Roger Williams*' church after he left them crumbled to pieces.

We have seen from *Callender*, that in his day, the oldest men, those who knew him, and were well acquainted with many of the most ancient inhabitants, never heard that *Roger Williams* was the founder of the baptist church there. So soon and so completely was that church dissolved. \*

\* See note B., appendix.

When Olney's church was formed I cannot tell ; but as Comer, dating the Newport Church no farther back than 1644, says it was the First of the Baptist denomination in America, Olney's church could not have been formed till after that period.

I think it could not have been formed till about the year 1650. My reasons are, I find no trace of a baptist church in Providence, after the failure of Roger Williams, till after that year. The first intimation of a church there, I find in the fall of 1651 when Holmes, after being scourged in Boston, returning home says, "The brethren of our town (Rehoboth), and Providence having taken pains to meet me four miles in the woods we rejoiced together." This occurred in September 1651. Even this notice does not prove that a church existed in Providence at that time ; for he speaks simply of the brethren of Rehoboth and of Providence. In Rehoboth there was no baptist church ; for Holmes and his brethren then belonged to the church at Newport ; and we are not certain their brethren at Providence were gathered into a distinct church, any more than were those in Rehoboth.

That it was as late as I have fixed, also, appears from another circumstance. I have not been able to find a single individual, out of Providence, who united with that church till after 1652 ; but every baptist up to that time, known to belong to a church, live where he may, belonged to the church at Newport. We know that in the year 1651, the Newport church had members in Lynn, and in Rehoboth in Mass. ; and that persons came from Connecticut to unite with it. The case of the brethren in Rehoboth is peculiarly in point. In 1650 they left the Congregationalists and became baptists. If at that time a church had existed in Providence, a neighboring town, how natural that they should unite with it, so near and easy of access, and not go all the way down to Newport to unite with the church there. The only way to account for this is, that there was no church at Providence, and no administrator there to whom they could apply.

It may be said, that the number of baptists whose names are recorded at that early date is few. Granted, but how does it happen that all those in another State, from thirty to near a hundred miles from Newport, should belong to that church, and not one of them to Providence ?

Shall I mention one or two circumstances more. Before 1652 some work had been performed in Massachusetts; the baptist standard had been lifted up on its high places. Enough had been done by that time to lay the foundation for a baptist church in Boston, in 1665, and to lead the first President of Cambridge College so to look at the subject, as ultimately to become a baptist. Who did that work? The members of the Newport church. Some little suffering before that time had been endured for the baptist cause. Baptists had been fined, imprisoned, scourged. Newport, and she alone, was the suffering church.— And what, with the exception of Roger Williams' attempt and failure, to the year 1652, and even beyond it, is nearly the entire history of our denomination, but the history of that same church?

How can we account for this, but on the supposition that the church at Newport was the first baptist church established in America? If before 1644 a church did exist in Providence, how is it, that neither friend nor foe has noticed her; that every baptist passed her by, even her nearest neighbors, and hurried down to Newport? How is it that for so many years she did nothing; suffered nothing; that no historian has been able to glean from her a line; and that not a single sign of vitality has been, up to that period, recorded of her?

The only conclusion to which we can come is, that the Newport church is not only older than the present church at Providence, but older than that from which it came off.

Williams, indeed, touched the baptist standard, but ere he raised it, his hand trembled and it fell. It was seized by a steadier hand; at Newport it was raised, and far and near they came to it; it was carried into the heart of Massachusetts; and a work was commenced which till the last setting of the sun, shall never cease; and this, before we have any evidence, that a church in Providence had begun to be.

Among the evils that have resulted from the wrong date of the Providence church, has been the prominence given to Roger Williams. It is greatly to be regretted, that it ever entered into the mind of any one to make him, in America, the founder of our



denomination. In no sense was he so. Well would it be for baptists and for Williams himself, could his short and fitful attempt to become a baptist, be obliterated from the minds of men. A man only four months a baptist, and then renouncing his baptism for ever, to be lauded and magnified as the founder of the baptist denomination in the new world! As a leader in civil and religious liberty I do him homage; as a baptist I, owe him nothing.

There is another name, long, too long concealed, by Williams being placed before him, who will in after times be regarded with unmingled affection and respect, as the true founder of the baptist cause in this country. That orb of purest lustre will yet shine forth, and baptists, whether they regard his spotless character, his talents, his learning, the services he rendered, the urbanity and the modesty that distinguished him, will mention JOHN CLARK as the real founder of our denomination in America.— And when baptist history is better understood than it is at present, every one, pointing to that venerable church which, on one of earth's loveliest spots he established, will say, "THIS IS THE MOTHER OF US ALL."

## APPENDIX.

(Note A., p. 9.)

It is evident that Callender was not a little perplexed, as to the relationship of Roger Williams to the baptist cause in Providence. After stating in the text, that it was said, Williams became a baptist, and formed a baptist church there, he adds in a note,—“ Since this was transcribed for the press, I find some reasons to suspect that Mr. Williams did not form a church of the Anabaptists, and that he never joined with the baptist church there.— Only that he allowed them to be nearest the scripture rule, and true primitive practice, as to the mode and subject of baptism.— But that he himself waited for new Apostles, &c.,” and then follows the words I have quoted.

Morgan Edwards, says,—“ I have one of the Century Sermons of Mr. Callender, with a *dele* upon this note, in his own hand writing.” I have tried to find that Sermon, that I may judge to what part of the note Callender referred; but I have not succeeded. What may we learn from that *dele*? That on some of the things referred to in this note, Callender changed his mind. What were they? Three distinct things are mentioned in the note. 1st, That Williams did not form a church (baptist) in Providence. 2d, That he never united with the church there. 3d, That the most ancient inhabitants of that place, those who knew him, &c., never heard that he formed the church there, but that Brown, Wickenden, &c., were the founders of it:

Now it could not be the last of these items, that Callender changed his mind upon; for this would be to convict himself of falsehood in originally making the statement. It must have been concerning the first and second items that the mind of Callender underwent a change; so that the *dele* does not affect the quotation I have made.

(Note B., p. 23.)

Callender's opinion may be quoted against this view. But we have seen under note A, that Callender himself was perplexed concerning the relation of Williams to the baptist cause. He opposes the view of Neale, that the church of Williams crumbled

to pieces, because a few years after, a flourishing baptist church was there. As Callender, however, had, while transcribing his sermon for the press, changed his mind about Williams forming a church in Providence, he must have supposed, that finding a flourishing baptist church there some years afterwards, might as well be accounted for on the supposition that it was formed by Brown, Wickenden, &c., as by its being originally formed by Williams, and having stood while he, its foundation, fell, fell as a baptist to rise no more. This latter view is undoubtedly correct. Nor have we any evidence that Callender, on this point, went back to the views of the text.





