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Laker, Benjamin [1]

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d. 21 Apr. 1701

Benjamin Laker, deputy to one of the Lords Proprietors [2] of Carolina, member of the governor's Council [3], judge, and Baptist leader, was in 1664 a resident of Betchworth Parish, Surrey County, England, and a member of the family of that name living in southern Surrey County in the vicinity of the towns of Guildford, Dorking, and Reigate. The county is remarkable for the number of surnames that later played an important role in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century General (or Free Will) Baptist history in North Carolina: Arthur, Ayres, Brookes, Burgess, French, Hart, Hearne, Health, Palmer, Purefoy, Roach, and Wingfield.

It is probable that Laker came under the influence of the Baptist [4] polemicist and pamphleteer, Matthew Caffin, an Oxford student who settled at Horsham and gathered and settled General Baptist congregations in Surrey and Sussex during the interregnum. On the restoration of the monarchy, Caffin and thirty-nine others presented to Charles II in 1660 "A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith" setting forth the religious tenets and peaceableness of the General Baptists, acknowledging the authority of the civil magistracy, and denying that they had insurrectionary aims. The "Confession" was reaffirmed in 1663, at which time Laker added his name to those of the earlier signatories. Laker is not known to have been personally troubled by the Conventicle Act, the mainspring for systematic repression of religious dissent in England from 1664 through 1666. He was, however, presented at the April 1667 term of the Surrey Quarterly Sessions for practicing the trade of a mercer without having first served the mandatory seven years' apprenticeship. Whether or not the complaint to the magistrates that resulted in the indictment was connected to Laker's status as a religious dissenter does not appear. At the October 1667 term, he was found not guilty by a jury from the neighborhood of Betchworth. The revival of a strengthened Conventicle Act in 1671 and the Test Act, which received the royal assent in 1673, gave an added fifteen years of religious repression. The Lords Proprietors of Carolina, cognizant of the situation of the dissenters [5] in England, seriously committed the Proprietary board in London and the government of Carolina to religious liberty (as opposed to mere toleration) as a basic constitutional principle. In 1682 the Proprietors went so far as to publish a number of promotional pamphlets in order to give widespread published assurances of religious liberty in Carolina. At least one of the pamphlets was given for publication to the General Baptist printer, Francis Smith, of the Elephant and Castle, who had printed the "Brief Confession" in 1660.

Laker's decision to emigrate with his family occurred at this time, and he seems to have left England with sufficient funds to begin his life in Carolina as a man of substance. Sometime after 1680 when Richard Bentley secured a new patent for his 1,500-acre tract on Albemarle Sound in Perquimans Precinct (originally held by him under a Virginia patent of 1663), he sold 400 acres of it to Laker. Here Laker settled with his wife Elizabeth and their six children and commenced the life of a planter with a white laborer and the people they enslaved. The people who were enslaved included: Francisco, Maria, and Mingo and Mingo's family. The usual "seasoning" by local fevers appears to have carried off Laker's son and oldest daughter, the latter of whom died in July 1685 (his wife and two other daughters dying at unspecified dates). In November 1685 Laker was obliged by court order to deport Mingo out of the colony after his conviction of theft from a neighboring plantation. Whether Mingo was deported with his wife and children or alone is not clear. Laker, however, continued to add to his landholdings and labor force. In 1688 his daughter Sarah married Thomas Harvey [6], then a member of the Council and subsequently deputy governor from 1694 to 1699.

Sometime in the 1680s Laker had been made a commissioner of the peace for Perquimans Precinct [7]. Early in 1690 Governor Philip Ludwell [8] gave him a deputation to represent in Albemarle one of the Lords Proprietors, consequently raising him to the governor's Council and to the benches of the highest courts of the colony. Since the records of the Council meeting as the chief executive body do not survive, it is impossible to tell how regular Laker was in his attendance; it is known, though, that he attended sessions in March 1695 and December 1696. Laker seems to have sat regularly as one of the judges in the high court of justice from the beginning of 1691 until the end of 1696, except for the fall session of 1695 and the spring session of 1696. His attendance on the land court was faithful, and he sat on most of the courts of claims held in 1695 and 1696. At the beginning of 1697, Laker stepped down from the Council and lived as a private gentleman until his death.

The evidences for Laker's role as a General Baptist leader in the colony are all circumstantial, and, unfortunately, all postdate his death. His will bequeathed to his daughter Sarah Harvey his copy of Thomas Grantham's monumental treatise on General Baptist doctrine and polity published in 1678 under the title *Christianismus Primitivus* [9]; in view of the fact that the Widow Harvey shortly thereafter married Christopher Gale [10], an ardent churchman, this was a regrettable bequest. To the husband of Laker's daughter Lydia, George Blighton of Martins Brandon Parish in Virginia, he left his copy of the *Exposition of the First Five Books of Moses* The remainder of Laker's property was left to his daughter Ruth and his third wife, Juliana Hudson Taylor Laker. The will was witnessed by, among others, Richard French.

On Laker's death, the Carolina Baptists appealed to the General Assembly of General Baptists in London for a minister or books. In June 1702 the London body raised a sum of money for the purchase of books to be sent to "our Brethren of the Baptist perswation and of the General Faith who have their aboad in Caralina." It is presumably of this group in Albemarle that the Reverend John Blair complained to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in January 1704, when he wrote of a set of people "something like Presbyterians, which is upheld by some idle fellows who have left their lawful employment, and preach and baptize through the country."

Richard French, one of the witnesses of Laker's will, the son of Richard French of Musbury, Devon, matriculated at St. Alban's Hall (belonging to Merton College [11]), Oxford, in 1685 and claimed to have been ordained by the vice-chancellor of Oxford. He emigrated to North Carolina in the late 1690s and settled near Laker in Perquimans Precinct. As early as 1701, French was performing marriages and terming himself "minister of the Gospel." He was prohibited from performing further marriages by an order of the executive council in 1705 as a result of his having pronounced as man and wife about 1704 a couple whose marriage was later declared to be bigamous (though, in fact, records suggest that the bride did no more than give birth to a child out of wedlock by another man early in 1703). That French continued baptizing and celebrating marriages is borne out by the complaints raised against him by the Anglican missionary John Urmston in the summer of 1711; French was ordered at the end of 1712 to appear before the Council to answer the charges. Since, however, French had been appointed to the commission of the peace for Perquimans Precinct and designated one of the quorum by Governor Edward Hyde [12] in July 1712, he had an undoubted authority to perform marriages after that date, and nothing more appears in the council minutes concerning the matter. French's death in 1716 removed him from the scene.

The family of Laker's son-in-law, George Blighton of Martins Brandon Parish in Virginia, seems to have been connected with Baptist activities there. As had been the case with the Carolina Baptists after the death of Laker, the Virginia Baptists appealed for ministers to the General Assembly of General Baptists in London following the death of Blighton in 1703. It is not known in what year the appeal was made, but in 1714 the Assembly ordained Robert Norden (who had joined that body in 1704) as a minister for Virginia. Norden appeared before the court of Prince George County, Va., in June 1715 and subscribed the oaths required of dissenting ministers. At the same time, George Blighton's adjoining neighbor, Matthew Marks, registered his house as a public meeting place for the Baptists; on his death in 1719, Marks further provided a living place for Norden for the duration of his ministry in Virginia. The records of Prince George County further show that Laker's daughter, Lydia Blighton Clements, and grandson, William Blighton, were familiars of Norden's supporter, Dr. John Hammersley, who in 1742 prepared a brief account of the Virginia Baptists for the Rhode Island Baptist leader, Nicholas Eyres. The indictment of Laker's grandson, William Blighton, in 1738 in Prince George County for failure to attend Anglican services may point to his attendance, instead, at a Baptist meeting.

Finally, it must be significant that in 1722, several years after the marriage of Paul Palmer to Laker's step-daughter, Joanna Taylor Peterson, in 1719, Palmer stopped attending Quaker [13]meetings and soon began his ministry as a Baptist preacher. Although Palmer is generally given the sobriquet "Father of North Carolina Baptists," it seems probable from circumstances that the title properly belongs to Benjamin Laker.

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