

Stearns, Shubal, Jr. ^[1]

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by David T. Morgan, 1994

28 Jan. 1706–20 Nov. 1771

See also: [Sandy Creek Baptist Association](#) ^[2]

Shubal Stearns, Jr., [Baptist](#) ^[3] leader, was born in Boston, the son of Shubal and Rebecca Larriford (Sanford?) Stearns. In his youth he moved with his parents to Connecticut and joined the Congregational church at Tolland. Little is known of his early years, but it is apparent from the few extant records that he belonged to a family of solid citizens. His father was one of the town proprietors of Tolland in 1716, the "proprietor clerk" in 1722 and 1724, and a selectman in 1724.

Much more is known of young Stearns and his activities after 1745. Stirred deeply by George Whitefield's preaching in that year, he, along with other advocates of the [Great Awakening](#) ^[4], left the Congregational fold and formed a "Separate" church. For six years this church grew steadily under Stearns's leadership, but the Connecticut Separates and their leader encountered some serious obstacles: Stearns became deeply involved in a crusade to secure the Connecticut General Assembly's recognition of the Separate churches' right to exist, but petitions of 1746 and 1748 were "resolved in the negative" in both houses. In turning down the petition of 1748 the Assembly insinuated that Stearns and the other 324 people who had signed it were revolutionaries, although the document plainly denied that the signers had any intention of promoting revolution. The petition did, however, assert for every Christian an "unalienable Right, in matters of ye worship of God, to Judge for himself as his Conscience Receives the Rule from God." All they wanted, claimed the petitioners, was the religious toleration guaranteed them in the Toleration Act, which Parliament had passed in the reign of William and Mary.

As if trouble with the provincial legislature were not enough, the Separates began to quarrel among themselves in 1751. The major issue was infant baptism. Stearns, coaxed by the New Light Baptist preacher Wait Palmer, renounced infant baptism and was himself baptized by Palmer. On 20 May 1751 he was ordained to the Baptist ministry. Meanwhile, he had organized a Separate Baptist church and served as its minister until 1754, when he became convinced that God wanted him to move "far to the westward, to execute a great and extensive work." Taking a few of his church members with him, he left Connecticut and moved to the backcountry of Virginia. There he "joined companies" with other Baptists led by Daniel Marshall, who was married to Martha Stearns, Shubal's sister. When it became apparent that the opportunities for Separate Baptist evangelism were too limited in the sparsely settled Virginia hinterland, the combined parties of Stearns and Marshall moved two hundred miles south to Sandy Creek in what was then [Guilford County](#) ^[5], N.C. There, Stearns had heard, were people eager to hear preaching. Shortly after their arrival at Sandy Creek in November 1755, the Separate Baptists established [Sandy Creek Baptist Church](#) ^[2]. From this base of operations the Separate Baptists, making emotional appeals for people to be saved and preaching a diluted Calvinistic theology, formed churches throughout North Carolina and then fanned out into Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. Led by Stearns, seven of the Separate churches in North Carolina and Virginia organized the [Sandy Creek Baptist Association](#) ^[2] about 1760. As new churches were constituted, the association grew larger. The Sandy Creek church itself grew from 16 to 606 members in less than fifteen years.

The militant evangelism of the Separate Baptists, which Shubal Stearns launched in 1755, suffered two blows in 1771. In May of that year Governor [William Tryon](#) ^[6] crushed the North Carolina [Regulators](#) ^[7], many of whom seem to have been Baptists. From the Sandy Creek area there ensued an exodus that drastically depleted the membership of the Sandy Creek Baptist Church. Later in the year Shubal Stearns died. The Separate Baptists would recover from the Regulator disturbance, the death of Stearns, and even the disrupting effects of the coming [Revolutionary War](#) ^[8], but the movement they had begun was clearly in disarray by the end of 1771. Not until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would the seeds sown by Stearns and his followers yield their greatest harvests.

On 6 Mar. 1726 Stearns married Sarah Johnson (Johnstone?) of Lexington, Mass. According to the early Baptist historian Morgan Edwards, Stearns "left no issue." He was buried at Sandy Creek.

References:

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^[11]

Additional Resources:

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