

Palmer, Paul ^[1]

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by George Stevenson, 1994

d. 1742?

Paul Palmer, general Baptist ^[2] clergyman and a founding father of Baptists ^[3] in the upper South, is traditionally said to have been a native of Maryland, to have been baptized in Delaware, ordained in Connecticut, and called to the ministry in New Jersey and Maryland, and to have ended his days in North Carolina. None of this tradition, which owes its existence to Morgan Edwards, the Calvinist Baptist historian, has ever been verified. Edwards, while touring American Baptist churches and gathering historical data on the eve of the American Revolution, did not visit the General Baptist churches in eastern North Carolina that grew out of Palmer's ministry, nor did he interview their clergy, who would have given him more accurate particulars of Palmer's life than he seems to have been able to collect.

Palmer's earliest known appearance is in the records of York County, Va. Shortly after May 1717 he married Martha Hansford Hill, the widow of Samuel Hill, mother of two small children, and keeper of a house of ordinary entertainment on the York road. She died during the first year of the marriage, and by May 1718 her brothers John and Charles Hansford had taken into their care her children by Hill and had assumed control of the ordinary. They also seized some of Palmer's property, including his fiddle and slave. Palmer's creditors followed in the wake of the Hansford brothers and commenced suits to recover debts from him, whereupon he decamped and withdrew into North Carolina.

Sometime before March 1719 Palmer established himself in Perquimans Precinct and married the well-to-do and twice widowed Joanna Taylor Jeffreys Peterson, stepdaughter of Benjamin Laker ^[4]. It is unknown when Palmer embraced Quaker ^[5] principles, but from 1719 until 1722 he was affiliated with the Perquimans Monthly Meeting of Friends. In July 1722 he requested a certificate of clearness from the meeting without asking that the certificate be sent to another meeting. Consequently, one supposes that it was in 1722 that Palmer fell under the influence of General Baptist doctrine.

The General Baptists were distinguished from their Calvinist brethren, the Particular Baptists, by their doctrine that held the life and death of Jesus to have been effective generally for the redemption of all of mankind who repented of past sins and believed in him, not merely for a particular few who had been elected for redemption out of the whole mass of fallen humanity. Such doctrines were not embraced casually, and they must have been carefully examined by Palmer during the years he held Quaker views.

Palmer had opportunity to discuss doctrine with General Baptist ministers in Virginia, with North Carolina Baptists who predated him, and with Baptists coming into the province from the northern colonies. Possibly Palmer had access to General Baptist expository works that had belonged to Benjamin Laker or that had been sent to North Carolina after his death by London General Baptists in 1702. The inventory of the Palmer plantation house in Perquimans made after the death of Palmer's daughter included a small library of about thirty books. How many, if any, of these books had originally been Laker's, how many had been sent from London in 1702, or how many had been Palmer's originally is beyond speculation, for the inventory does not report the titles of the books.

If Palmer was not influenced by the Virginia Baptists during the period of his conversion, he was in communion with them shortly thereafter. The General Baptist churches there (located in Prince George, Surry, and Isle of Wight counties) were under the general superintendence of Robert Norden, formerly of Warbleton in Sussex (England) who had been ordained as messenger to Virginia in 1714. (The office of messenger, a sort of diocesan bishop among the General Baptists, was conferred by the imposition of hands of at least two other, but preferably three, messengers; was held for life; and empowered the holder to gather and establish churches, to make annual visitations of the churches, to settle unsettled congregations, to determine orthodoxy of doctrine, to ordain deacons, ministers, and elders, and to strengthen the hands of ministers.) Since Norden's ordination as messenger was specifically to Virginia, it is likely that he exercised no general superintendence over North Carolina. It is probable, however, that with or without the assistance of Richard Jones, elder of the Surry and Isle of Wight churches, he ordained Palmer shortly after his immersion.

Palmer's earliest work was in the four precincts north of Albemarle Sound ^[6], where there was already an established Baptist presence. Besides the old group that had been led by Benjamin Laker in Perquimans Precinct, there was a pocket of General Baptists in Chowan, where two of them had sat on the vestry of St. Paul's parish in 1714. Northeastern Pasquotank ^[7], which never had been penetrated successfully by the Quakers, proved to be highly receptive to Baptist

doctrine, while neighboring Currituck was home in 1718 to a lifelong Baptist physician whose six adult children had not been christened as infants. From his center on Lakers Creek in southwestern Perquimans Precinct, Palmer journeyed into the other three precincts preaching, baptizing, and laying his hands on the newly converted.

In northwestern Chowan near the Chowan Indian town, Palmer found a community with a large population of settlers from Nansmond County, Va., where there was a persistent tradition of religious dissent from the established church. Some had arrived in the area prior to the Tuscarora Indian war ^[8] in 1711–15. Others came into the area upon the cessation of hostilities. Giles Rainsford, missionary from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts ^[9], preached here in 1714 and complained that though vast crowds came to hear him, his auditory expressed little or no devotion in time of divine service. Perhaps in part to correct this situation, and in part to accommodate the growing population, the vestry of St. Paul's parish built a chapel of ease in the area and appointed a reader in 1719. Palmer had his earliest success in this community. It was presumably due to his preaching that Thomas Roundtree, a member of St. Paul's vestry, "turned anabaptist" at the end of 1726, much to the consternation of his fellow vestrymen, who summoned Roundtree to explain the matter. When a second vestryman, John Jordan, likewise joined the General Baptist church at Indian Town Creek in 1728, he asked to be excused from the vestry on account of age, wisely saying nothing about his having joined the General Baptists. Palmer is traditionally said to have "gathered" this church in Chowan Precinct ^[10] in 1727, but the contemporary account written in 1729 says that he "settled" it—a term that normally means that the congregation already existed but in an unsettled condition.

While working with the Chowan congregation Palmer discovered the length to which malice in a community could go. At the end of January 1728 John Dunning, who lived in the neighborhood of the General Baptist church at Indian Town Creek, put out the report that Palmer had tried to seduce his wife, Rebecca. When the report came to the ears of Palmer, he publicly denounced Mrs. Dunning as a notorious liar and a woman of lewd life who had indecently exposed herself to him in an unsuccessful attempt to seduce him. The Dunnings then sued Palmer for defamation and caused a summons to be left at his house in Perquimans Precinct in his absence. When the General Court sat in July 1728 Palmer, presumably still absent from home, did not appear in court to defend himself. Under the technicality of default by nonappearance, the Dunnings were granted a writ whereby £500 of Palmer's goods could be seized and sold if Palmer did not appear at the October court to answer the Dunnings. Sometime during the next three months Palmer called on the Dunnings, with the result that Dunning voluntarily retracted his accusation in open court at the October session (*Retraxit propria personas*, as the docket has it).

While Palmer worked with the congregation in Chowan, he concurrently visited and preached in northeastern Pasquotank Precinct. On 15 Oct. 1729 William Burgess petitioned the precinct court to register his dwelling as a meeting place for a Baptist congregation gathered in the precinct. At the same time, Palmer, who had signed the petition with Burgess and six others, appeared before the court and subscribed the oaths prescribed for dissenting ministers desiring protection under the Toleration Act of 1689. The inference is that this was a small congregation recently gathered by Palmer in the face of local opposition sufficiently strong to make necessary an appeal to the court for protection under the Toleration Act. The Pasquotank congregation was probably half the size of the one in Chowan.

Confronted with the problem of securing resident ministers for the congregations, Palmer turned his thoughts to the Rhode Island General Baptists of whose work and reputation he had learned. The Chowan congregation wrote the Reverend John Comer, the Calvinist pastor of a General Baptist church in Newport at the end of summer 1729; twelve men of the congregation signed the letter, presumably as guarantors for a salary to be subscribed in the event a minister could be found for them. Comer received the letter on 27 Sept. 1729. On 2 November Comer was visited by Constant Devotion, presumably a kinsman of the two Massachusetts Baptist clergymen, Ebenezer and John Devotion. A few days later, on 7 Nov. 1729, Comer made his reply to the Chowan church. His diary entries reveal neither the topic of his conversation with Constant Devotion nor the nature of his reply to the Chowan church. Since, however, Devotion shortly afterwards went to North Carolina where he is found in Albemarle County ^[11] General Baptist centers in company with Palmer, and subsequently in General Baptist centers in the Roanoke and Tar River ^[12] valleys in company with William Surginer, one takes it that Comer discussed with Devotion the work in North Carolina at the time of his visit in November 1729 and that Devotion went to the colony (in whatever capacity—private church member, exhorter, or minister) either on account of, or with knowledge of, that work. In December 1729 Comer, who was gathering information on American Baptists, opened a correspondence directly with Palmer. By a happy circumstance the yearly meeting of the New England General Baptists had met at Newport earlier in 1729; thirty-two elders, deacons, and representatives of fourteen churches in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York had attended. Comer apparently described the yearly meeting to Palmer with the result that Palmer, accustomed only to the small Virginia–North Carolina yearly meeting, was invigorated and inspired by the account.

Nothing is known of Palmer's education. He wrote a legible hand casually and well-formed hand carefully. He had been taught surveying and held an appointment as surveyor for Albemarle County under deputation of the provincial surveyor general. It is doubtful, however, that Palmer was educated to the standard of many of the northern Baptist clergy. Nonetheless, he prepared for publication a manuscript entitled "Christ the Predestinated and Elected" and sent it to Comer early in 1730. He then decided to make a personal tour of the northern churches and by the autumn of that year set sail for Boston. Palmer seems to have visited the churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut first. Then, at the beginning of October, he visited and preached in Rhode Island, and at the end of the month he was at Piscataqua, N.J. At the latter place he joined Elder John Drake in ordaining to the ministry a young man named Henry Lovell who had already been active as a preaching brother. Shortly afterwards, when charges were made that Lovell, prior to his conversion, had been a runaway indentured servant who had taken up life with another man's wife (presumably meaning that he had married a divorced woman whose husband was still alive), Palmer, Comer, Drake, Elder Daniel Wightman, and all who had

endorsed Lovell, or had aided in his ordination, fell under harsh criticism from the churches in West New Jersey for having failed to perform the necessary scrutiny of the candidate's life. Palmer completed his tour among the General Baptists by following an overland route that would have taken him from New Jersey to New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. He presumably arrived home again during the year 1731, but the absence of any reference to Palmer in surviving North Carolina records for the whole of the year 1731 and the first eleven months of 1732 leaves the date of his return to the province in question.

During the year 1733 Palmer lived in his usual quiet way as a planter, minister, and surveyor in Albemarle County. The year 1734, however, opened the last, remarkable phase of the clergyman's life. In the summer of that year Palmer and his wife executed a joint deed of gift settling their real and personal property on their two children, Martha Ann and Samuel, aged about fourteen and twelve respectively. This preparatory measure left Palmer free to face the considerable personal dangers of a much enlarged ministry that is known to have taken him into Beaufort ^[13], Hyde, Craven, Onslow, and New Hanover ^[14] precincts in Bath County ^[15], and into South Carolina and Maryland. It is singular that he restricted his ministry to the sounds, rivers, and creeks of the outer coastal plain of North Carolina at the very time that the inner coastal plain was being settled, and settled to a large degree from those General Baptist centers served by his friend Richard Jones in Virginia—Surry and Isle of Wight counties. It is almost as if a division of labor had been agreed upon at the 1734 yearly meeting of Virginia and North Carolina churches, with Palmer committing himself to a ministry on the seaboard while leaving the Roanoke and Tar River basin frontier to another or to others or to God. In April 1734 Constant Devotion was in company with Palmer, and one is much struck by the fact that it is shortly thereafter that Devotion is to be found with William Surginer ^[16] in the Roanoke River valley on the eve of the blossoming of General Baptist churches in that area.

At the end of 1734 the General Baptists in South Carolina invited Palmer to go to Charleston to preach to them at the yearly meeting of South Carolina Baptists to be held on 8–9 Feb. 1735. As a very small minority who shared an endowed meetinghouse with a Calvinist majority, the General Baptists in Charleston had little opportunity to hear any other than Calvinist doctrine—hence their invitation to Palmer. They sent the invitation with neither the knowledge nor the consent of the Calvinist majority. As a result, when Palmer arrived in Charleston he found himself silenced by a pulpit filled both days by unsympathetic Calvinists who refused to yield to him. Angered by this treatment, the General Baptist minority (from whose families had come much of the endowment for the church in Charleston) went into consultation with Palmer. He described Rhode Island to them as "having Great plenty of ministering brethren," and at his suggestion, they wrote to the elders, deacons, and brethren in Newport asking assistance in obtaining a pastor for their congregation. No pastor was furnished from Rhode Island, however, and the congregation was settled in 1736 by Elder Robert Ingram, who allied them with the General Assembly of General Baptists in London. In 1739 the Assembly ordained Henry Heywood messenger to South Carolina. It is possible that Palmer visited Charleston again before his death, meeting Ingram or Heywood or both.

In the autumn of 1735 Palmer sailed to Maryland to console, instruct, and advise the General Baptists in that province. Stopping at Indian River in August, he attended the court for Somerset County, took the oaths required of a dissenting minister, and registered six places in the county (the easternmost ones now in Sussex County, Del.) as sites of Baptist meetings. From here he seems to have sailed to Wilmington, Del., then crossed overland by the post road ^[17] to another General Baptist center that had been established at Chestnut Ridge, northwest of Baltimore. This community is traditionally said to have been served sometime prior to Palmer's advent by George Eaglesfield. This presumably would have been prior to 1725, in which year Eaglesfield left Philadelphia for ordination as pastor to the congregation at Middletown, N.J. Eaglesfield, as a mere licensed preacher rather than an ordained minister, had been unable to perform the ceremony of baptism and laying on of hands, and his converts had had to be sent to Philadelphia for administration of those ordinances, as the Baptists term them (rather than sacraments). Palmer did not labor under those difficulties, and he baptized converts at Chestnut Ridge. By October 1735 he was home again in Perquimans Precinct, where he stayed for the rest of the year.

The remaining four years of Palmer's life were spent in a continuing circuit through the precincts of Bath County and up into Maryland—preaching, baptizing and laying on hands, gathering congregations, ordaining exhorters and ministers, and exercising a general supervision over all. In fact, his ministry took on the characteristics of the office of messenger. He had purchased a tract of land on Town Creek in New Hanover Precinct (now Brunswick County ^[18]) before the end of 1734. He is known from contemporary records to have gathered a congregation from Broad Creek, Flea Point, and Greens Creek in present Pamlico County ^[19], another from Goose Creek in Beaufort and Pamlico counties, one from Pungo River in Beaufort and Hyde counties, and yet another from Swift Creek in present Pitt and northern Craven counties. On the south side of Neuse River ^[20] he preached and baptized at Hancock Creek and in the area of Brice Creek; on the upper reaches of the river he made conversions among the settlers of Contentnea Creek. In Onslow County ^[21] he gathered a church on New River ^[22], some families from Chowan church having moved to that place. A generation after his death a place where he had baptized in Trent River near Deep Gully (in present Jones County ^[23]) was still known variously as "Paul Palmer's Landing" and "Paul Palmer's Dipping Hole."

Early in 1738 Palmer prepared to take his ministry into the two principal towns of New Bern ^[24] and Edenton ^[25]. In March he purchased Lot 112 in the former town, and in April he purchased Lots 161 and 162 in the latter. Simultaneously in April 1738 Palmer contracted with John Pratt, millwright and house carpenter, to build for him in Edenton and at his plantation in Perquimans Precinct, two identical, small, shingle-roofed, wooden-chimneyed, one-and-a-half-story houses measuring fifteen by twenty feet. It is probable that Palmer contracted for a similar structure in New Bern, and it is likely he intended these to be General Baptist centers, serving both as meeting place and as accommodation for traveling ministers. (One notices that Richard Bevan of Hyde County ^[26] bequeathed in 1744 his dwelling house and plantation for the use of traveling Baptist ministers in that county.)

Late in 1738 Palmer sought an effective means of countering opposition to his ministry in the southeastern precincts by securing so broad a protection under the Toleration Act as would render unnecessary an appeal to every local court with jurisdiction over the area in which he preached. The result was a license (October 1738) allowing him to preach as a dissenting minister in any precinct in the province. This step might have been in specific response to the reaction of antagonistic magistrates in Craven Precinct to his having gathered his converts there into a church, for by May 1739 his critics in Craven were complaining that an exhorter and a minister whom Palmer had ordained (Francis Ayres and William Fulsher) were creating public disturbances by their "misbehaving speeches." Subsequently Palmer's churches in that area, having been repulsed by the court for the counties of Beaufort and Hyde and repelled by the Craven County ^[27] Court when attempting to register their meeting places, took their cue from Palmer's 1738 maneuver by successfully appealing directly to Chief Justice Montgomery for protection under the Toleration Act.

In the autumn of 1739, Palmer was obliged to return from his work in the southeastern precincts to his home in Perquimans. His son, Samuel, died on 24 Nov. 1739, very nearly on his eighteenth birthday. Palmer preached his burial sermon upon the text in *Proverbs*, "I love them that love; and those that seek me early shall find me."

In the spring of the following year, Palmer sailed for the last time up the Atlantic coast of Maryland to Indian River. His ministry there had come so near to fruition that the church members planned to build a meeting-house on a half-acre of land at the Healing Spring on the west side of Swann Gut. On 1 May 1740 Palmer addressed a letter to the clerk of court for Somerset County, Md., asking that this place and a private dwelling be registered as places of public worship for his congregations there. From Indian River, Palmer went to the General Baptist congregation at Chestnut Ridge, northwest of Baltimore. On this occasion his preaching and baptizing seems to have aroused the anger of a local magistrate. On 29 Jan. 1742 Palmer was obliged by William Young, a justice of the peace, to appear at the March term of the Baltimore County Court to answer such allegations as should be made against him by the justice. Two of his converts, William Talbot and John Sumner, acted as sureties for Palmer's appearance. When the case was called in court, however, neither Palmer nor his sureties appeared, and the six witnesses against him were discharged. Palmer appears at some point to have informed Henry Lovell (the young man whose ordination in 1730 by Palmer and others had caused such an outcry in the Jerseys) of the work at Chestnut Ridge and to have interested him in undertaking the pastoral care of the congregation there. In view of the reaction by the civil authorities to Palmer's ministry in the county, Lovell, who organized the church under a formal constitution in July 1742, appealed (with success) to the Baltimore County Court at its August 1742 term for protection under the Toleration Act.

No more is heard of Palmer after his 1740–42 trip to Maryland. His wife purchased land in her own name in June 1743 so she was publicly recognized as a feme sole, rather than feme covert, by that date. One assumes, therefore, that Palmer died in Maryland in 1742 or immediately upon his departure from that place. No clear statement of the fact of his death, however, has been found.

Palmer's reputation has swung from one extreme to the other. His journal was probably contained in the "Several old Pockett Books" inventoried with the other contents of his house following the death of his daughter. Had those little memorandum books survived, we might be far better able to assess with accuracy the effect of Palmer's life. As it is, only a few fragments, some legal proceedings, and a smattering of contemporary remarks remain to help his successors understand him. Morgan Edwards, the Calvinist Baptist historian writing in 1772–73, described Palmer as the father of the General Baptists in North Carolina (whom he viewed as wrong-headed, of no spiritual account, and stumbling blocks in the paths of divine grace). Wittingly or unwittingly Edwards played the role of blackguard to Palmer's posthumous reputation. "He was not so happy," says Edwards in the voice of Mrs. Candor, "as to leave a good character behind him."

Writing in 1930, George W. Paschal ^[28] redeemed Palmer's reputation, pointing out the enormous debt that all Baptists in the state owe to him. In view of the fact that Palmer took up and continued the work of others, that his ministry in North Carolina was restricted to the outer coastal plain, and that the work of the General Baptists in the inner coastal plain was separate from his ministry, it may be inexact to call him the father of General Baptists in the state. On the other hand, in view of the facts that the General Baptist churches founded independently of Palmer in the inner coastal plain were all destroyed by the particular form of Calvinism that swept into that area during the Great Awakening, and that most of Palmer's congregations in the outer coastal plain were perseveringly faithful to the doctrine of general provision taught by Palmer, it must be conceded that the Free Will Baptist churches (as the General Baptists came to be called) owe a debt both of doctrine and survivorship to the churches and clergy raised up under Palmer.

Of Palmer's family, little is known with certainty. His son, Samuel, had died in 1739 at age eighteen, and his widow, Joanna, died in 1747 at age sixty-one. His daughter, Martha Ann, married Walter Kippin (d. 1754), a New York merchant in the coastal trade who settled in Edenton in 1746; by him she had a son named Samuel born in 1749 and a daughter named Joanna (familiarily called Ann and Nancy) born in February 1751. Martha Ann Palmer Kippin died early in 1759 leaving the two children in possession of a very handsome estate. By John Hodgson (d. 1774), Palmer's granddaughter Joanna Kippin had in 1774 two daughters, Elizabeth (named for Hodgson's mother) and Sarah (named for his aunt, Sarah Eelbeck). By 15 July 1775 she had become the second wife of Edward Benbury of Edenton. Samuel Kippin sold part of his Perquimans County ^[29] lands in 1772, and nothing more is heard of him thereafter.

Of others of the Palmer family in the province, it is possible that Nathaniel Palmer who died in Perquimans Precinct early in 1728 (and of whose estate Paul Palmer was administrator) was a brother or other near kinsman. The second Samuel Palmer of Perquimans Precinct who was licensed to build a house of ordinary entertainment on the courthouse lot in October 1739 and who died on 4 Dec. 1739, ten days after the death of Paul Palmer's son Samuel, might have been a kinsman as well.

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