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Palmer, Paul [1]

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d. 1742?

Paul Palmer was a general Baptist [2] clergyman and a founding father of Baptists [3] in the upper South. Morgan Edwards' 1772 account of Baptist History in North Carolina states that Palmer was born in Maryland and later baptized in Welsh Tract, Delaware, before eventually being ordained in Connecticut. According to Edwards, Palmer ministered in New Jersey and Maryland before coming to North Carolina.

Palmer's earliest known appearance is in the records of York County, Virginia. In May 1717, he married Martha Hansford Hill, a widow with two small children who owned a tavern, also called a house of ordinary entertainment. She died during the first year of the marriage. By May 1718, her brothers John and Charles Hansford, were caring for her children and had assumed control of the tavern.

Sometime before March 1719, Palmer established himself in Perquimans Precinct and married the wealthy and twice-widowed Joanna Taylor Jeffreys Peterson, stepdaughter of Benjamin Laker [4]. From 1719 until 1722, Palmer was affiliated with Quakers in the Perquimans area and attended Monthly Meetings of Friends. In July 1722, he requested a certificate of dismissal from the meeting without asking that the certificate be sent to another meeting.

Palmer's earliest work in establishing a Baptist church was in the four precincts north of Albemarle Sound [5], where there was already an established Baptist presence. In addition to the Baptists in Perquimans Precinct, there were congregations of General Baptists in parts of Chowan, Pasquotank [6], and Currituck precincts. From his home on Lakers Creek in the Perquimans Precinct, Palmer journeyed into the other three precincts preaching, baptizing, and laying his hands on the newly converted.

Palmer formed his first church in Chowan Precinct [7] in 1727, likely from a preexisting congregation. In 1728, while working in the Chowan Precinct, Palmer was sued by John Dunning and his wife for defamation. Palmer was away from home in July when the summons was left at his home and did not appear at court to defend himself. Before the October court session, the Dunnings voluntarily retracted the accusation.

During this time, he also visited and preached in the Pasquotank Precinct. He signed an October, 15, 1729 petition from William Burgess to register his house as a meeting place for a Baptist congregation in the precinct. That same year, Palmer took an oath administered by the courts that acknowledged the supremacy of the English crown and provided protection under the Toleration Act of 1689.This act allowed most non-Catholic Christian denominations the freedom to worship.

While nothing is known of Palmer's education, he did hold an appointment as surveyor for Albemarle County under the purview of the provincial surveyor general. He also wrote a manuscript he hoped to publish entitled "Christ the Predestinated and Elected" and sent it to John Comer, the Calvinist pastor of a General Baptist church in Newport at the end of summer 1729, around 1730.

In 1730, Palmer set sail for Boston with the purpose of traveling to northern churches. Palmer visited churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut. At the beginning of October, he visited and preached in Rhode Island, and at the end of the month he was at Piscataqua, New Jersey. By 1733, Palmer lived and worked as a planter, minister, and surveyor in Albemarle County. In the summer of 1734, 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. That same year Palmer purchased a tract of land on Town Creek in New Hanover Precinct (now Brunswick County [8]). 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 February 8-9, 1735. In the autumn of 1735, Palmer sailed to Maryland to act as a General Baptist minister 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 as sites of Baptist meetings. From here he sailed to Wilmington, Delaware, then traveled to Chestnut Ridge, northwest of Baltimore. By October 1735 he was home again in Perquimans Precinct.

The remaining four years of Palmer's life were spent traveling throughout the eastern part of North Carolina and up into Maryland where he preached, baptized, laid on hands, gathered congregations, and ordained ministers. Church records show he performed this work in the counties of Pamlico, Beaufort, Hyde, Pitt, Craven, Onslow, and Jones. Early in 1738, Palmer prepared to take his ministry to New Bern [9] and Edenton [10] by purchasing lots of land. In April 1738, Palmer contracted John Pratt, a local carpenter, to build two small, one-and-a-half-story houses measuring fifteen by twenty feet in Edenton and on his Perquimans plantation, possibly intended for the purpose of Baptist meeting houses.

Palmer sought an effective means of countering opposition to his ministry by securing broad protection under the Toleration Act. The result was a license obtained in October 1738 that allowed him to preach as a dissenting minister in any precinct in the province. Subsequently, Palmer's churches in Beaufort, Hyde, and Craven [11]counties successfully appealed for the same protection under the Act.

Palmer's son, Samuel, died on November 24, 1739, just before his eighteenth birthday. Palmer returned to his Perquimans home some time before this and preached the burial sermon for his son.

In the spring of the following year, Palmer sailed for the last time up the Atlantic coast of Maryland to Indian River. Church members there planned to build a meeting-house and so Palmer sent a letter dated May 1, 1740 to the Somerset County, Maryland clerk of court, asking that the meeting house and a private home be registered as places of public worship. From Indian River, Palmer went to Chestnut Ridge, northwest of Baltimore. On January 29, 1742, Palmer was instructed by justice of the peace William Young at the Baltimore County Court in March. At that time he would have to answer for any allegations made against him by the justice. William Talbot and John Sumner, two members of his congregation there, promised and ensured that Palmer would appear. Six witnesses against Palmer were dismissed when Palmer, Talbot, or Sumner did not appear when the case was called before the court.

No more is heard of Palmer after this trip to Maryland. His wife purchased land in her own name in June 1743 indicating that Palmer died at some point before then and after the January 1742 court summons.

Palmer's widow, Joanna, died in 1747 at age sixty-one. Their daughter, Martha Ann, married Walter Kippin (d. 1754), a New York merchant in the coastal trade who settled in Edenton in 1746.

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