

Surginer, William ^[1]

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by George Stevenson, 1994

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William Surginer, General Baptist leader who established churches in present [Warren](#) ^[2], [Halifax](#) ^[3], [Edgecombe](#) ^[4], and [Nash counties](#) ^[5], was a major figure in North Carolina colonial Baptist history. He is said by Richard Knight to have led surviving members of the General Baptist church at Burley, Va. (when that place was "visited with a wasting pestilential disease") to Kehukee on the [Roanoke River](#) ^[6] in present southeastern Halifax County about 1742, and to have founded General Baptist churches in quick succession in the Roanoke and [Tar river](#) ^[7] valleys during the next few years. In actuality, Surginer moved from Isle of Wight County, Va., to the area of Kehukee as a teenager in the mid-1720s. He arrived with the family of an older kinsman, John Surginer, who was given a grant of 350 acres at Kehukee on 9 Apr. 1725 for the importation of himself and five others.

Upon attaining his majority, William Surginer bought land for himself adjoining that of his kinsman; he made his first purchase at Kehukee in 1729. When he next appears in the records, the General Baptist church at Kehukee had already been established, and Surginer (who donated the land for its meetinghouse) was its pastor and nearing the apogee of his ministry. Morgan Edwards was unable to gather precise data about Surginer and the origin of his church at the time of Edwards's visit in the early 1770s. In his manuscript "[Materials Toward a History of the Baptists of North Carolina](#)" ^[8], Edwards says that the church was formed about 1742 and that its congregants were from Burley in Isle of Wight County. In the earlier version of his collected notes, "Tour . . . to the Baptists of North Carolina, 1772–1773," he states that they began under one William Wallis. Clearly Edwards was unable to obtain answers to his usual interrogatories concerning ministers and their churches: when and where baptized and by whom, when and where ordained and by whom, and (of churches) when constituted and by whom.

The sense of both Edwards's and Knight's accounts is that the area of Kehukee was settled largely by families from southeastern Virginia, among them some who had attended or been members of the General Baptist church in Isle of Wight County pastored by the two Richard Joneses. This church was nearly fifty miles northeast of Kehukee. Despite this distance, some contact appears to have been kept up between the church and its emigrating families. Presumably Surginer was baptized and ordained by the second Richard Jones of Burley during the early 1730s. If so, Surginer no doubt would have attended the yearly meeting of the Virginia and North Carolina General Baptist churches and would have been at the 1734 yearly meeting. That meeting seems to have been extremely important, for either there, or in conference elsewhere at the time, a concord appears to have been reached whereby Paul Palmer agreed to extend his ministry throughout the counties of North Carolina's outer coastal plain while another, presumably Surginer, would minister to the frontier settlements in the inner coastal plain. If this was the case, it may be assumed that Surginer's effective ministry outside his immediate area of Kehukee commenced shortly after 1734. It may also be assumed that the progress of the parallel ministries was the subject of reports in yearly meetings, for Surginer began to attract others who came to his assistance.

By the late 1730s Surginer was joined in the inner coastal plain by a Baptist hatter named Constant Devotion, who, it appears, helped Surginer in his work. Little is known of Devotion, but that little is suggestive. When the General Baptist church in [Chowan Precinct](#) ^[9] wrote to John Comer of Rhode Island presumably in search of a pastor in 1729, Comer delayed his reply to the church for six weeks. The letter was received by Comer on 27 Sept. 1729. On 2 November Comer was visited by Constant Devotion, and on the seventh Comer replied to the church in Chowan. What Comer said in his reply is not known, but Devotion was with Paul Palmer in eastern North Carolina in 1734, that watershed year during which areas of responsibility seem to have been established by General Baptist leaders. Devotion was in Edenton during 1735 and 1736, when he, with another Rhode Island Baptist named Joseph Witter, was assaulted by an angry bricklayer. Later that year Witter returned home to Westerly, R.I., and sometime between 1736 and 1739 Devotion moved west to Kehukee Swamp. In 1739 he sat on a coroner's jury at Kehukee, and in 1740 he purchased a tract adjoining the land of John Surginer. In the spring of 1742 Devotion visited the community on Lower Fishing Creek (where a General Baptist church was gathered in 1748) and that summer met his death there by a fall from his mare. It is not known whether Devotion was an ordained minister or whether he was an exhorter. If ordained, it was after his visit to Comer in 1729. All the same, it is probably significant that the gathering of four General Baptist churches one after another by Surginer on the Roanoke and Tar rivers (Kehukee, ca. 1742; Falls of Tar River, 1744; Fishing Creek, 1745; and Lower Fishing Creek, 1748) fell hard on the heels of Devotion's arrival in Surginer's neighborhood in the late 1730s.

If Surginer's work drew Devotion to the Roanoke and Tar rivers, it attracted others as well. By 1740 Peleg Rogers (who had lived in Palmer's home precinct of [Perquimans](#) ^[10] in 1728, but who had moved into Bertie Precinct by the mid-1730s) had moved to Town Swamp south of Tar River just outside the territory covered by Surginer's ministry. At the beginning of 1744 Rogers, as an Anabaptist, appeared before the Edgecombe County Court and took the oaths prescribed for dissenting ministers by the Toleration Act of 1689. Rogers was probably responsible for extending the area of General

Baptist influence and for gathering a church near the headwaters of Town Creek and Toisnot Swamp by or before 1748; that church was subsequently destroyed and a new church erected at Toisnot by the introduction of Calvinist doctrine in 1758, by which time Rogers had moved to Duplin County ^[11].

Surginer's ablest coadjutor was Josiah Hart. Hart, a disciple of and successor to Paul Palmer, fostered Palmer's churches in the outer coastal plain from 1740 to 1747. He then joined Surginer in the inner coastal plain. Over the next three years the ministries of Surginer and Hart, like that of Palmer, assumed the characteristics of the office of a General Baptist messenger. Hart, without a family and able to earn his living anywhere as a physician, seems to have had a greater freedom of movement than Surginer. Hart was in southern Bertie County ^[12] in 1746, at Lower Fishing Creek in Edgecombe in 1747, then at Kehukee, Falls of Tar River, and Toisnot in 1748; in 1749 he was for a while in Isle of Wight County, Va., then back again at Lower Fishing Creek—all the while serving as Tyrrell County ^[13] clerk of court (1747–49).

Together, Surginer and Hart preached, baptized, and raised up a new generation of ministers. They enjoyed a brilliant success. Then, suddenly, Surginer died and some of the fires in Hart appear to have been dampened. Hart buried Surginer, marked his grave at Kehukee, and stayed in the area through the year 1753. He then returned to the outer coastal plain and to business affairs tangled by inattention during his long stay with Surginer. From 1755 to 1757 Hart was tied down by several concurrent suits in Tyrrell and Beaufort counties. By the spring of 1758 Hart, too, was dead. The final years of Hart's life, when he was absent in the east, were critical years for the General Baptist churches in the inner coastal plain. The Calvinist doctrine—that of the mass of humanity, only the handful selected for salvation by God before the foundation of the world could hope to enter into a state of grace (as opposed to the doctrine held by the General Baptists that any of humankind could enter into a state of grace by believing in Jesus and repenting of one's sins)—was imported into the inner coastal plain. Henry Whitfield's tempest had begun to blow along the banks of the Roanoke and Tar rivers. As the recently ordained General Baptist ministers were swept up by these new winds of doctrine, the same gusts toppled from their places the candlesticks of the General Baptist churches planted by Surginer and his coadjutors. Without settled pastoral care, the congregations of General Baptists first languished, then "dissolved," as Isaac Backus terms it. Nevertheless, Morgan Edwards and all succeeding Baptist historians trace the histories of the Calvinist Baptist churches of the area back to their General Baptist origins and invariably acknowledge Surginer to have been one of the principal founding fathers of Baptists in North Carolina's inner coastal plain.

Surginer married Mary West Boykin, the widowed daughter of William West of Beaufort County ^[14], sometime before 1744. He was survived by his wife and their three children: Jacob, Ann, and Tamar.

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