

The Religious, Social, and Political Radicalism of the Byington Family  
[Paper for ASDAH Conference at La Sierra University, March 18, 2016]

I suspect that most Adventists think that John Byington was a strong advocate of church organization, Bible-based doctrines, and a conservative lifestyle. Indeed, the dour faces that scowl back at us from Byington photographs taken later in life would seem to argue that neither John nor any member of his family ever entertained a radical thought in their entire lives. But my recent research in state historical societies and libraries in St. Lawrence County, New York, Barre, Vermont, and Hartford, Connecticut tell a far different story. Indeed, between 1815 and 1850, many members of the Byington family espoused radical religious, social, and political views and actions.

#### Religious Radicalism

For half a century, beginning around 1800, John's father Justus and his uncles had all been Methodist Episcopalians in Vermont. In the 1810s and '20s, Justus Byington became a circuit-riding preacher in Vermont and northern New York.<sup>1</sup> In 1816, after John's conversion at age 18, he too became a Methodist-Episcopal itinerant preacher in Vermont.<sup>2</sup>

But the Methodist-Episcopal Church prior to the Civil War was a denomination in turmoil. First, in 1816, about 2400 African American members, outraged at the partiality shown toward whites in church elections and racially segregated seating in Southern congregations, seceded from the Church and formed the African Methodist-Episcopal Church.<sup>3</sup> In 1828 many white members, displeased with the growing autocratic power of the bishops and lack of lay representation, seceded from the Methodist-Episcopal Church and formed the Methodist Protestant Church.<sup>4</sup> John's father Justus Byington was one of the leaders in forming this new denomination, which abolished the office of bishop, formed committees to conduct church business, and gave local preachers more authority.<sup>5</sup>

But many felt that the Methodist Protestant Church had not gone far enough in its reforms, especially in the area of racial equality. So in 1836 delegates from the Vermont Methodist Protestant Church declared “that...the practice of holding fellow men in involuntary slavery is a sin, and ought to be abolished.” Facing resistance among mainstream Methodists, this group—which included Justus and John Byington—seceded once again and formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church. They refused to admit anyone as a member who owned slaves, favored slavery, or voted for slave-holding officials. Strong temperance advocates, Wesleyans also expelled members who bought, sold, or manufactured alcoholic beverages. Even more radical, they encouraged women to speak in public to mixed groups of men and women (called “promiscuous speaking”).<sup>6</sup>

When John and Catharine Byington moved to northern New York around 1830 and settled in Bucks Bridge, they carried their radical religious views with them. In 1841 John helped form the new Wesleyan Methodist congregation in Morley, about five miles away; he even took charge of building its church and its parish house, both of which still stand today. In 1843 the congregation chose him as their pastor; several times they elected him as a delegate to various local conferences and national conventions.<sup>7</sup> At the General Conference session of 1844 which met in Cleveland, Ohio, Byington was appointed to the prestigious Committee on Revisals to update the organizational discipline of the Church. In 1848 he was ordained as pastor of the nearby Lisbon Wesleyan Methodist Church; a year later he erected a chapel there.<sup>8</sup>

### Social Radicalism

The chapels and parish houses that John Byington built in St. Lawrence County in the 1840s contain a secret that has only recently come to light. In the basement of the Methodist chapel and in the attic of the parish house in Morley, he had created tiny, windowless rooms with

secret trap doors hidden behind exterior furniture. Why? Because John Byington was, in fact, an abolitionist and an agent on the Underground Railroad which helped fugitive Negro slaves escape from the South to freedom in Canada. Thanks to Tom Calarco's recent book *The Underground Railroad in the Adirondack Region* (2004), we now know that the Underground Railroad, which cut west through St. Lawrence County, included several secret hideouts in the Lisbon-Bucks Bridge area (including the Winthrop House with its trap door in the kitchen leading to a tiny cellar room).<sup>9</sup> My research in the St. Lawrence County Historical Society in Canton, New York and the Vermont Historical Society in Barre, Vermont, has unearthed a gold mine of material revealing the scope of the Byington family's participation in abolitionism.

In the 1830s and 1840s, John's brother Anson Byington was an active member (and occasionally the president) of the Chittenden County, Vermont Anti-Slavery Society. He helped draft a constitution that bound members (which included blacks and whites) never to vote for anyone "unfriendly to the great doctrine of Abolition" and to use their moral, financial, religious, and political influence "for the ultimate overthrow of American slavery as a system which is rendering us odious in the sight of the nations of the earth as well as the God of the Universe." Between 1838 and 1842 Anson Byington served on the Executive Committee and on the Business Committee of this society. During his tenure, he voted for resolutions condemning slavery as "unchristian and Anti-Christian," contrary to the Gospel, "a sinful system, a curse to the whole land" which must be abolished. Members resolved to help fugitive slaves escape through Vermont to Canada by any means in their power—and records show that this one local society helped about a dozen slaves reach freedom every year. Further evidence proves that Anson was one of two Underground Railroad agents living in Williston who assisted fleeing slaves to escape along what is now State Route 7.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, back in New York, it was radical preachers like Charles Finney, Orange Scott, and Luther Lee who jump-started the abolitionist movement. Evidence shows that John Byington became an abolitionist largely through the influence of the Rev. Luther Lee, who left the Methodist-Episcopal Church over slavery just as the Byingtons did. As a Wesleyan Methodist circuit-riding preacher in New York for thirty-seven years, Lee was active in the same church, abolitionist, and political circles that the Byingtons participated in. Lee became the chief spokesman for the St. Lawrence County Anti-Slavery Society; a delegate to the New York State Anti-slavery Society convention in 1835; and editor of both the abolitionist newspaper the *New England Christian Advocate* and the Methodist paper *The True Wesleyan*—both of which the Byingtons read. Lee’s aggressive anti-slavery campaign in the 1830s, ’40s, and ’50s frequently took him to St. Lawrence County where the Byingtons lived, so they undoubtedly heard him speak many times. One final proof of his influence upon them, I think, is that John Byington named one of his sons Luther Lee Byington.<sup>11</sup>

New evidence reveals that the citizens of St. Lawrence County chose John Byington to chair meetings of the “Friend of Man” (the name for the anti-slavery societies) at Potsdam, Gouverneur, Plattsburgh, and Bucks Bridge. In 1842 they appointed John chairman of the St. Lawrence County Anti-Slavery Society; he participated in the Abolitionist Convention in West Potsdam in 1844 and in the Friends of Freedom gathering in Canton in 1850.<sup>12</sup>

The Byingtons and their Hilliard cousins also signed anti-slavery and abolitionist petitions which were sent to the United States Congress. In 1839, John’s sister Lucy (Byington) Hilliard signed a county-wide anti-slavery petition asking Congress to abolish slavery. In 1845 John’s brother Wesley Byington (named after Methodist founder John Wesley) added his name to an anti-slavery petition to Congress from the citizens of Canton and Morley. In 1851 dozens

of citizens from Lisbon and Canton—including Wesley Byington—sent yet another anti-slavery petition asking Congress to pass a law providing any fugitive slave with the benefit of a jury trial to prove “that he is the slave of the claimant” before he could be returned to his master. Then in 1854 John’s older brother Anson Byington and a near relative, S. S. Byington of Oswegatchie, added their names to an abolitionist petition sent on behalf of the citizens of Oswego and Ogdensburg. One historian has alleged that John Byington himself signed anti-slavery petitions, but they are no longer extant.<sup>13</sup>

For his extreme views, John’s brother Anson and his wife Theoda were expelled from the Williston, Vermont Congregational Church, which was, in fact, an abolitionist congregation. In 1844 its church board had passed nine resolutions against slavery, calling it “a flagrant violation” of God’s Word that fostered “every vile passion” and “sears the conscience” to do wrong.

Anson Byington, however, thought that these resolutions did not go far enough. He urged the church board to expel any members who had voted in favor of the slave-holding presidential candidates James Knox Polk and Henry Clay. Arguing that those who voted for pro-slavery candidates were as guilty as the slaveholders themselves, Anson decided to absent himself from Communion rather than to associate with such “tainted” church members. For his radical stand, the church board censured him in 1848 and finally expelled him from the church in 1849.<sup>14</sup>

Anson carried his extreme abolitionist views with him when in 1858 he became a Sabbath-keeping Adventist. One year later, he cancelled his subscription to the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* because, as he told its editor, Uriah Smith, the paper “failed to aid the cause of abolition” strongly enough. Fortunately for Anson, the fledgling Adventist group in Battle Creek did not summon him before yet another church trial.<sup>15</sup>

## Political Radicalism

In addition to being a religious and social activist, the Byingtons' abolitionist views predisposed them to espouse radical political views. During the 1840s John Byington joined the Liberty and Free Soil parties. The first truly anti-slavery political organization, the Liberty Party was also one of the first libertarian parties in American political history. Formed by abolitionists and evangelicals who believed in political action to achieve anti-slavery goals, "an intense religiosity permeated most of the group's activities." In 1840 they adopted a platform stating their goals: to pressure legislators to take anti-slavery positions; to prevent the spread of slavery to new territories in the West; to end the interstate slave trade; and to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1840 and 1844 they nominated James G. Birney of Kentucky for U.S. President. In 1848, when they chose the abolitionist Gerritt Smith of New York for President, their platform advocated separation of church and state, free trade, and universal suffrage (including the right of Blacks and women to vote).<sup>16</sup>

Not only did John Byington vote for these candidates, but he also attended or chaired Liberty Party meetings in St. Lawrence County in the 1840s. When the Free Soil Party replaced the Liberty Party after 1848, Byington supported its goal of keeping slavery from spreading to the new states being carved out of the Trans-Mississippi West.<sup>17</sup>

However, in 1854 a new party was formed in Jackson, Michigan, called the Republican Party. Uniting abolitionist and anti-slavery adherents from the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party, and the Whig Party, this national party would continue to oppose slavery until it was abolished under President Abraham Lincoln. From 1854 until their deaths, the Byingtons would remain faithful Republicans.<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSION

So what impact did all this radical religious, social, and political activity have upon Elder John Byington's later career as a minister in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? In his religious experience, Byington always remained a "Seventh-day Methodist" circuit-riding preacher. Unlike his ministerial associates, John did not accept a salary from the church; instead, he supported himself and his family from their farm income, selling grain, butter, apples, calendars, his wife's homemade mittens, and occasionally fixing teeth.<sup>19</sup> Also, he did not hold evangelistic tent meetings to convert new members or debate non-Adventist clergymen about biblical doctrines; instead, he preferred holding revival meetings among Adventist believers.<sup>20</sup> Finally, like Ellen White and J. N. Loughborough, Byington often attended the Sunday services of the Methodists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Baptists as he perambulated about Michigan.<sup>21</sup>

In his social life, John Byington developed deep-rooted friendships with Blacks, Native Americans, and other non-whites. Like Ellen White and Loughborough, he loved to spend the night with the Hardys, an African American Adventist family living in central Michigan. Their warm hospitality and zealous service to the church were legendary.<sup>22</sup> In 1884, near the end of their lives, John and Catharine also attended a parade marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire—and both wrote about what that meant to them in their diaries.<sup>23</sup>

In his political life, John Byington remained a staunch Republican. In his diaries, he wrote down the candidates for U.S. President for whom he voted: Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, and, just before he died, Chester A. Arthur.

Given Byington's strong roots in the Liberty and Free Soil parties, it would have been inconceivable for him to vote for the pro-slavery Democrats.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, although John Byington's post-1852 career as a circuit-riding preacher-revivalist, organizer of churches, first General Conference president, and writer of articles advocating ascetic lifestyles for Adventists has given many the impression that he was an archconservative by nature, my research has demonstrated that between 1815 and 1852, John, his brother Anson, and several other relatives actively participated in many of the radical religious, social, and political movements sweeping America at the time. In my forthcoming book, *John Byington: First General Conference President, Circuit-Riding Preacher, and Radical Reformer*, I will further elucidate this unknown side of the Byington family.

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<sup>1</sup> "Justus Byington," [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) (accessed October 31, 2013); Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 3 vols. (NY: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 3:451 and Appendix, p. 3; William H. Snider, "The Life of John Byington," typed manuscript at the Center for Adventist Research, James White Library, Andrews University, August 3, 1967, pp. 6-7; Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1799-1818, 1823, 1833-1840* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1840), see 1818 Conference, pp. 13, 28 and 1819 Conference, p. 14; W. S. Rann, ed., *History of Chittenden County, Vermont, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason, 1886), 534-35, 545-46, 718.

<sup>2</sup> George Amadon, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 25, 1887, p. 57; Daniel and Grace Ochs, *The Past and the Presidents: Biographies of General Conference Presidents* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1974), 9; John Byington, *RH*, October 24, 1882, p. 672.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Siimpson, ed., *Cyclopoedia of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Everts and Steward, 1878), 14-16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 602-607; Margaret B. Macmillan, *The Methodist Church in Michigan: The Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Michigan Area Methodist Historical Society and William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 147, 154-56; A. B. Hyde, *The Story of Methodism* (Springfield, MA: Willey, 1888), 182-83; Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 2:434-36.

<sup>5</sup> Snider, "John Byington," pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Luther Lee, *Autobiography* (NY: Phillips and Hunt, 1882), 271-73; Donald G. Matthews, "Orange Scott: The Methodist Evangelist as Revolutionary," in Martin Duberman, ed., *The Anti-Slavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 71-101; Simpson, *Cyclopoedia*, 922-24; Charles E. Tuttle, *Vermont and the Antislavery Movement* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Antiquarian books, 1937), 47-48; Neil Adams McNall, "Anti-Slavery Sentiment in Vermont, 1777-1861" (M.A. Thesis, University of Vermont, 1936), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Morley Wesleyan Church, *Continuing Service, 150 years, 1843-1993* (Canton, NY: Morley Wesleyan Church, 1993), 3-4; Champlain Conference Historical Committee, *One Hundred and Twenty-five Years for Christ, 1843-1968: History of the Champlain Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America* (West Chazy, NY:



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Champlain Conference Historical Committee, July 1968), 7-16; John O. Waller, "John Byington of Bucks Bridge," *Adventist Heritage* I, no. 2 (July 1974): 6; Bryan Thompson email to Sylvia Nosworthy, July 7, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Waller, "Byington," 11-13, 65; Franklin B. Hough, *A History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties, New York, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Albany: Little & Company, 1853; Baltimore, MD: Regional Publishing Company, 1970), 445, 522, 523; Records of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Morley, New York, ms. 006388, Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Calarco, *The Underground Railroad in the Adirondack Region* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 7, 51-52, 56, 226-28, 268-69; [www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyst.lawr/Bucks\\_Bridge.PDF](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyst.lawr/Bucks_Bridge.PDF) (accessed June 11, 2013); Brian Strayer, interview with Charles Lashomb, July 3, 2013, at the home of Walter and Doris Lacks in Norwood, New York; photographs taken by Walter Lacks on July 2, 2014. Lashomb and Lacks personally saw the closet, the trap door, and the tiny cellar chamber in the Winthrop House, while the pastor of the Morley Wesleyan Methodist Church snapped the photos of the hiding place in the parish house.

<sup>10</sup> *Chittenden County Anti-Slavery Society Constitution, Minutes, &c, 1838-1842* (Chittenden, VT: Anti-Slavery Society, 1842); Vermont Historical Society, *Document Packet*, 7-8, 11, 21; Howard Coffin, *Full Duty: Vermonters in the Civil War* (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press, 1993), 37-39; Wilbur H. Siebert, *Vermont's Anti-Slavery and Underground Railroad Record* (Columbus, OH: The Spahr and Glenn Company, 1937), 67-68, 72-74, 88, 93, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Bryan Thompson, "Saint Lawrence County Abolitionist Time Line," email attachment to Brian Strayer, July 17, 2013; idem, "Amnesia: The Abolitionists and Black Pioneers of the St. Lawrence," typed sermon, February 10, 2008; Lee, *Autobiography*, 42, 140, 167-73, 198, 231, 241-44; W. L. Chaplin to Truman Smith, November 14, 1854, quoted in Bryan Thompson, email to Brian Strayer, July 17, 2013; Calarco, *Underground Railroad*, 237-40; Simpson, *Cyclopedia of Methodism*, 803-808; George Claude Baker, *An Introduction to the History of Early New England Methodism, 1789-1839* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1941), 51-57.

<sup>12</sup> Bryan Thompson, email to Sylvia Nosworthy, July 7, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Anti-Slavery Petitions of 1839, 1851, and 1854, St. Lawrence County Historical Association, [www.slcha.org/cwrt/abolitionist/index.php](http://www.slcha.org/cwrt/abolitionist/index.php) (accessed July 17, 2013); Hough, *History of St. Lawrence County*, 284.

<sup>14</sup> Snider, "John Byington," p. 29; "Anson Byington," [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) (accessed October 31, 2013); Waller, "Byington," *Adventist Heritage*, pp. 9-10; Anson Byington, "Exhibition of Facts and Principles in Connexion with the Trial and Excommunication of Anson Byington from the Congregational Church in Williston, VT" (Williston, VT: Published by the Author, 1849), 3-22.

<sup>15</sup> Anson Byington and Uriah Smith, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 10, 1859, p. 124; John Harvey Waggoner, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 28, 1859, p. 181; see also Snider, "John Byington," p. 29, and Doug Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 28.

<sup>16</sup> "Liberty Party," [www.tulane.edu/~latner/LibertyParty.html](http://www.tulane.edu/~latner/LibertyParty.html) (accessed July 14, 2013); [www.britannica.com/print/topic/33982](http://www.britannica.com/print/topic/33982) (accessed July 14, 2013); [www.alexpeak.com/twr/libertyparty/](http://www.alexpeak.com/twr/libertyparty/) (accessed July 14, 2013); Calarco, *Underground Railroad*, 98; Doug Morgan email to Brian Strayer, November 20, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Bryan Thompson email to Sylvia Nosworthy, July 7, 2010; John Byington's December 19, 1846 resolution, quoted in Snider, "John Byington," p. 17; John Byington's 1850 speech, quoted in *The True Wesleyan*, July 1850 and in the *Review and Herald*, December 13, 1979, p. 10; Thompson, "St. Lawrence Time Line (1848)"; [www.alexpeak.com/twr/libertyparty/](http://www.alexpeak.com/twr/libertyparty/); [www.alexpeak.com/twr/libertyparty/](http://www.alexpeak.com/twr/libertyparty/).

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, "St Lawrence Time Line"; John Byington's diaries (1857-58, 1861, 1868-1886) indicate his support of the Republican Party.

<sup>19</sup> John Byington, Diaries, 1861, 1868, 1869, 1873, 1874.

<sup>20</sup> See chapters 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16 in Brian E. Strayer, "John Byington: First General Conference President, Circuit-riding Preacher, and Radical Reformer," unpublished book manuscript (2015), Center for Adventist Research, Andrews University.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> John Byington, Diaries, April 1871; October and November, 1872; January and November 1874.

<sup>23</sup> John Byington, Diary, August 19-22, 1884; Catharine Byington, Diary, August 18-21, 1884.

<sup>24</sup> See John Byington's Diaries for 1861, 1868, 1872, 1876, 1880, and 1884.