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Seventh-day Adventists and Abolitionist Petitions

Kevin M. Burton

The Intersection of Morality and Public Policy

The historiography of Millerites and Seventh-day Adventists (herein referred to collectively as adventists) generally assumes that these apocalyptic groups were apolitical.¹ At least four

¹ This theory has been applied to all premillennialists from postmillennialists, particularly since World War I, and the Millerites and their decedents are typically presented as the quintessential exemplars that prove its veracity. Here is an incomplete, but representative list of works from the 1960s to the 2010s that have advanced this distinction. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*, The Jonathan Edwards Classic Studies Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 59-66; Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (1968; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 34, 232; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 357-358, 845; J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 6-7; Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 131; David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, 38, Charley Hardwick and James O. Duke, eds. (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 74-77, 99; Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 24-25; Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into Evangelical Subculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 32-33; Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 15; John R. McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 20, 51; William E. Juhnke, "Prophetic Pacifism in the American Experience: A Response to Grant Underwood and George R. Knight," in Theron F. Schlabach and Richard T.

overlapping factors have led to this mischaracterization. First, much of that interpretation is rooted in a narrow understanding of the term “politics” that is envisioned as distinct from “religion” and limited to partisanship.² Second, historians have been

Hughes, eds., *Proclaim Peace: Christian Pacifism from Unexpected Quarters* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 173; Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 38-40, 49, 100-101; David Morgan, *Protestant & Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29, 34; Thomas F. Curran, *Soldiers of Peace: Civil War Pacifism and the Postwar Radical Peace Movement*. The North's Civil War Series, No. 22, Paul A. Cimbala, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 6-7, 15, 197; Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17-18; David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*, Religion in America, Harry S. Stout, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28 ; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48-51; Newell G. Bringhurst, “Four American Prophets Confront Slavery: Joseph Smith, William Miller, Ellen G. White, and Mary Baker Eddy,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 120-141; George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War*, The Littlefield History of the Civil War Era, Gary W. Gallagher and T. Michael Parrish, eds. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 3; Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 215; Sean A. Scott, *A Visitation of God: Northern Civilians Interpret the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 161; Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser, “Introduction,” in Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser, eds. *Apocalypse and the Millennium in the American Civil War Era*, *Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War*, T. Michael Parrish, ed. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 2-4; Alison Collis Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: The Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Transformation of Religion in the Delta* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63; Matthew Harper, *The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 6-8, 165-166n14; Richard Carwardine, “Antebellum Reform,” in *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism*, Heath W. Carter and Laura Rominger Porter, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 66-67.

² For example, Ronald D. Graybill has argued that the Millerites were “distracted from social reform movements by an intense religious crusade.” The problem is that this distinction between “social reform” and “religious” crusades assumes that the two projects could not harmoniously coexist. Ronald D. Graybill, “The Abolitionist-Millerite Connection,” in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed., Ronald L. Numbers and

imprudently reliant on the discredited theory that claims apocalypticism causes adherents to become socially withdrawn and inactive.³ Third, scholars have limited themselves through an overdependence on sources in adventist archives and ignored or dismissed the political issues advocated therein with supposedly apolitical terms such as “paper radicalism.”⁴ Finally, adventist historiography has been primarily focused on leaders at the near-complete oversight of the “average” adherent.⁵

Jonathan M. Butler, eds. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 143.

³ The most important critics of this theory include: James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 28-36, 75-80, 138-139, 273-279; James H. Moorhead, “The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought, 1865–1925,” *Church History* 53, no. 1 (March 1984): 61-77; James H. Moorhead, “Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800–1880,” *Journal of American History* 71, no. 3 (December 1984): 524-542; Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 12; James H. Moorhead, “Apocalypticism in Mainstream Protestantism, 1800 to the Present,” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 3, *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, Stephen J. Stein, ed. (New York: Continuum, 1998), 79; James H. Moorhead, *World without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880–1925*, Religion in North America, Catherine L. Albanese and Stephen J. Stein, eds. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1-18; Stephen J. Stein, “American Millennial Visions: Towards Construction of a New Architectonic of American Apocalypticism,” in *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson, eds. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 201; W. Michael Ashcraft, “Progressive Millennialism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, Catherine Wessinger, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45, 48, 52; B. M. Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7-9, 154-165.

⁴ Jonathan M. Butler, “Adventism and the American Experience,” in *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*, Edwin S. Gaustad, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 173-206; Eric Anderson, “War, Slavery, and Race,” in *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 270.

⁵ Though not solely responsible, the Ellen G. White Estate has done much to steer Adventist historiography in the direction of social history through the publication of *The Ellen G. White Letters & Manuscripts with Annotations*, vol. 1, 1845- 1859 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2014). The first volume of this series is

As will be seen below, one way in which my research seeks to overcome these issues is through the exploration of anti-slavery petitions submitted to Congress, the House of Representatives, and state legislatures.

Discovering the Adventist Abolitionists

To collect such petitions has required a clearly defined methodology and will continue to take a considerable amount of time. The first challenge is to identify Millerites and Sabbatarian Adventists by name. Since no adequate database provides this information, I began, for the Millerites, by copying general conference membership lists into an Excel spreadsheet (several such lists were published in the *Signs of the Times*). I have thus far been more thorough regarding the Sabbatarian Adventists, by writing down every name I have found in all available diaries, letters, manuscripts, and periodicals. Such thoroughness has its limitations, however, and at present I have only extracted information from the 1840s through the middle of 1853.

Though these lists are invaluable sources for historical research, they are virtually useless without the person's corresponding residence. To illustrate, while my list of Sabbatarian Adventists currently includes 1,758 names, I know the residence of no more than 40% of those individuals. Beyond this, other factors complicate this methodology. Since people moved fairly frequently in the 1840s and 1850s, it is necessary to know when people lived at the place they did. Religious defections and detachment also complicate the process; just because a person's name appears in an adventist source does not indicate that they were or remained an adventist (although it usually does). Therefore, a significant amount of research is needed to verify that

the first major work of Seventh-day Adventist history to give serious attention to non-leaders, though not in narrative form.

the correct individual has been identified and that she or he was an adventist during the period of my research. In spite of such complications, such databases open seemingly endless possibilities for new research that will lead to more nuanced descriptions of the adventist past.

Though I began to create my databases with broader research intentions in mind, when I discovered that Joseph Bates was an active petitioner, I realized that I had the tools to find more adventist signatures on petitions.⁶ Though ultimately rewarding, this too, has proven to be quite time consuming. The largest corpus of extant petitions are housed at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and made available through the Center for Legislative Archives.⁷ Thousands of anti-slavery petitions survive but many have been destroyed (for example, one employee used to burn petitions to stay warm while working⁸). Many of the surviving petitions are separated into two categories: those submitted to the Senate and the House of Representative. The petitions in both of these categories are organized by subject and congress number (which provides an approximate date for undated petitions). Many more abolitionist petitions were seemingly extracted from this collection (or taken from elsewhere) at random and placed in a variety of Library of Congress collections (also housed at NARA).

Needless to say, this method of organization was not devised to readily facilitate searching for individual names on petitions. No finding aids exist to point researchers to the boxes that contain petitions from certain towns, counties, or states. Therefore, when I

⁶ Kevin Burton, “Joseph Bates and Adventism’s Radical Roots,” *Adventist Review*, March 3, 2020. Available at <https://www.adventistreview.org/joseph-bates-and-adventisms-radical-roots> (accessed May 31, 2020).

⁷ For more information, visit <https://www.archives.gov/legislative>.

⁸ Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, & Women’s Political Identity*, Gender & American Culture, Thadious M. Davis and Linda K. Kerber, eds. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003),173-174.

began to search through abolitionist petitions at NARA in April 2019, I started looking through petitions submitted to the House during the 26th United States Congress (March 4, 1839, to March 4, 1841). Since my lists of names were far from comprehensive, I decided that I would need to make a list of each petition I encountered and write down the location of the petition and box number in which it is stored so that I could more easily find them again when needed. I will eventually give this crude finding aid to the Center for Legislative Archives to assist future historians in their research of abolitionist petitions. I have thus far spent only 12 days on this project at NARA, but have already documented the location of nearly 5,000 petitions.

Far fewer anti-slavery petitions submitted to state legislatures have survived. The Maine State Archive, for example, retains less than fifteen anti-slavery petitions (they have been scanned and placed online; https://digitalmaine.com/arc_img/). While the Vermont State Archive contains a significantly higher number, none of the anti-slavery petitions submitted to the state legislature from 1840 through 1865 have survived. However, the names of every signatory on extant petitions have been written on a card catalogue index available to researchers on location, which is exceedingly helpful. By contrast, at least 20 cubic feet of petitions (not all of which relate to abolition) submitted to the New York State Legislature have survived, but were badly damaged by fire in 1911 and currently unavailable for research. The most accessible (and probably most complete) collection of state legislature anti-slavery petitions are housed at the Massachusetts State Archive. Several thousand anti-slavery petitions have both survived and been digitized by Harvard University (they are accessible at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/antislaverypetitionsma>). These petitions can easily be searched by location or by the first few names listed on the petition.

Summary of Research

In total (exclusive of the time taken to prepare lists of names) I have devoted about four weeks to petition research. Much of this time has been spent noting the location of petitions at NARA and state archives, meaning that I have spent only about two weeks actually looking for adventist signatories on petitions. Nevertheless, as of May 2020 I have identified 51 different Millerites and Sabbatarian Adventist petitioners on 118 different petitions. These statistics do not include one significant petition, however. On February 3, 2020, I guided some of my students from Southern Adventist University through NARA as they assisted me in my petition research. During this time, one of those students, Xavier Snyder, found a petition submitted to the U.S. Congress in April 1862 that was prepared and circulated by “Seventh Day Adventists and others” from Linn County, Iowa. This petition—the first to be found that was circulated in the name of the Adventist Church—contains 44 signatures, most of which were Seventh-day Adventists.⁹ Therefore, close to one hundred adventist signatories have been found in only about four weeks of time.

These petitions have great historical significance and illuminate our understanding of religion and politics generally and apocalypticism, Millerism, and Seventh-day Adventism specifically. First of all, since the majority of these petitions were circulated and signed by practicing adventists, it dispels once again the charge that premillennialists are apolitical. More important, however, is the fact that these petitions reveal the religious and political views of both adventist leaders and laypeople and grant us insight into their views on gender and race.

⁹ Angela Baerg, “Students Gain Rare Hands-on Experience at National Archives,” *Southern Tidings*, May 2020, available at <https://www.southerntidings.com/news/students-gain-rare-hands-on-experience-at-national-archives/> (accessed May 31, 2020).

Female abolitionists were among the most active petitioners, and as Susan Zaeske has demonstrated in her book, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery & Women's Political Identity*, this political act was both highly controversial in antebellum America as well as foundational for the women's suffrage movement.¹⁰ The fact that numerous adventist women signed (and probably circulated) anti-slavery petitions reveals that they too contributed to both the abolitionist and women's rights causes in America's history. In regard to race, while it is significant that adventist women and men joined the tiny minority of Americans willing to sign and circulate petitions protesting southern slavery, it is perhaps more significant to find that they were among the even smaller minority to petition against Jim Crow racism in the North.¹¹ Numerous adventists, for example, petitioned against segregation on northern trains and against all laws that distinguished people by color—including Massachusetts' law that forbid interracial marriage. Far from being apolitical, in the early 1840s adventists contributed to the overthrow of both Jim Crow segregation on Massachusetts trains and the state's interracial marriage law—two of the abolitionists' key victories.¹²

This excursus regarding the search for adventist petitioners reveals a deeper need in adventist studies to look beyond the adventist archives for sources on adventist history and think outside the stereotypes that have been placed upon the adventist collective. It reminds us again that it is ill-advised to draw major

¹⁰ Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*.

¹¹ In 1840, for example, Joseph Bates was able to gather 80 signatures for abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, but only 21 for the eradication of Massachusetts' Jim Crow laws. "Massachusetts Legislature: List of Petitions Presented to the Late Session of the Legislature," *The Liberator*, April 3, 1840, 54.

¹² Richard Archer, *Jim Crow North: The Struggles for Equal Rights in Antebellum New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 91-108, 135-148; Amber D. Moulton, *The Fight for Interracial Marriage Rights in Antebellum Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

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conclusions without first thoroughly searching for adequate documentation to either prove or disprove our initial hypotheses.

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