

The Browns and the Baptists

J. Stanley Lemons*

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The famous Rhode Island Brown family — “The Browns of Providence Plantations”—played a major role in the life of Providence’s First Baptist Church during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their influence continued into the nineteenth century, when it faded as the latter generations ceased being Baptists and stopped participating in the church’s affairs. The Browns’ involvement with the church began with Chad Brown in 1639; John Carter Brown, who died in 1874, was the last family member surnamed Brown to own a pew, but he was never a member of the church.



Left: *The Meeting House of the First Baptist Church in America was a radical departure from the plain meetinghouse style of the Baptists. “A S.W. View of the Baptist Meeting House, Providence, R. I.” engraved for the Massachusetts Magazine, August 1789. RIHS Collection, (RHi X3 6403).*

During its first century the church — the first Baptist congregation in America — did not have large numbers, and its members were concentrated in certain families: the Browns, Fenners, Winsors, Olneys, Jenckeses, Tillinghasts, Spragues, Whipples, Watermans, Thurbers, Dexters, Sheldons, and others. The Browns were pillars of the church, supplying it, during their eight generations of involvement, with pastors and elders, but as they became increasingly wealthy, the Browns tended to become Episcopalians.[1]

Chad Brown (?-died before 1650) was not among the original members of the church when it was founded in 1638, but the received tradition is that he became the second pastor when Roger Williams resigned from the church in 1639. Chad Brown’s accession is attested to by all the earliest writers about the church.[2] Some old Brown family sources claim that Brown was the church’s first pastor — a claim repeated three times in Charles Rappleye’s 2006 book, *Sons of Providence* — but it is a claim not

supported by the evidence.[3] Thomas Olney, one of the church’s founding members, was ordained as its third pastor, and he served along with Chad Brown for a number of years before leaving the church in 1652 in a split over what kind of Baptist church it was to be.

Chad Brown was likely a moderating force in Providence and in the Baptist church. He played a very important role in the town — among other things, he surveyed the original lots that were laid out along Towne Street (North and South Main Streets) — and he was described as having a “cooler temperament” than Roger Williams.[4] After Williams’s resignation Brown was chosen by church members to be their preaching elder, and he remained so until his death sometime before 1650. It is notable that the church’s first schism occurred in 1652, after Brown had died; it may well have been Brown’s cool temperament and

conciliatory manner that kept the congregation together in the 1640s as the Providence church was being transformed from a Particular Baptist to a General Baptist church.

Disagreements between General Baptists and Particular Baptists split the Providence church twice and nearly caused a third division. The controversy was an ongoing problem, and the Browns were right in the center of these battles. The General Baptists (who were the original English Baptists in 1610) believed that everybody had a chance to be saved, provided that one made the right decision. The Particular Baptists (who first appeared in England about 1630) were Calvinists who believed that only those whom God had chosen — the elect of God — would be saved. This was the doctrine of predestination.

Roger Williams was a Particular Baptist; so too was John Clarke of Newport, who founded the first Baptist church in that town. Both these original Rhode Island Baptist churches began as Particular (or Calvinist) Baptist, but both suffered schisms in the 1650s as the number of General Baptists increased. The Particular Baptists seceded from the Providence church in 1652, following Thomas Olney, a strict Particular Baptist, into a new church that eventually dissolved by 1718. Under the leadership of William Wickenden and Gregory Dexter, the General Baptists came to control Providence's First Baptist Church, which remained a General Six-Principle Baptist church until 1771. When John Clarke's Newport church split in 1656, the seceding General Baptists formed the Second Baptist Church of Newport.[5]

The Browns remained in the original Providence Baptist church, where they clearly were prominent members. Chad Brown's son, John (1630-1706), was chosen to be an elder, but not the church's pastor. Elders were leaders chosen from the congregation and ordained by the congregation (then as now, each Baptist church picked its own leaders).[6] The Providence church usually had concurrent "plural elders," with one elder recognized as the pastor; another elder, often called the "teacher," served as a kind of assistant pastor. During the eighteenth century a number of elders of the Providence church became the pastors of other Baptist churches in Rhode Island: these included Jonathan Sprague, John Hawkins, and Joshua Winsor in Smithfield; Peter Place in Smithfield and Gloucester; and Daniel Averitt in Richmond.[7]

John Brown was not a preaching elder, but his son, James, was. James Brown (1666-1732) became the eighth pastor of the First Baptist Church at age sixty, six years before his death. He was in the middle of a dispute that nearly split the church again. The issue was how rigid the church would be in requiring people to "go under hands" before being admitted to the church and to the Lord's Supper. The ritual "laying-on-of-hands" before one could join or take part in the communion service was one of the six cardinal principles of the General Six-Principle Baptists. Laying-on-of-hands was a widespread practice among Christians; but in the hierarchical, liturgical churches it was reserved for the ordination of priests and deacons. The practice was the ritual manifestation of the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, which held that the authority of Jesus Christ was passed to the Apostles, who then passed it on to those who followed all through the centuries.

Although rejecting the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, Baptists did practice laying-on-of-hands as part of the "priesthood of all believers." Except for the Quakers, the General Six-Principle Baptists were the most democratic denomination in the seventeenth century. Their practice of laying-on-of-hands was meant to level everyone, nearly abolishing the clergy itself.[8] At General Six-Principle Baptist meetings anyone could "testify" (a form of preaching); this included women, who also had voting rights at these meetings.[9]

By 1730-31 the Browns and the Jenckeses sought to relax the requirement of "going under hands." [10] However, a strong faction led by Deacon Samuel Winsor strenuously objected, and at one point the two factions were meeting separately. In May 1732 a pact was signed by the leading elders and men of the congregation to require that the ritual of going under hands be strictly adhered to. Communion services were closed to anyone who had not gone under hands. When James Brown died five months later, he was replaced by Samuel Winsor himself.[11]

The Brown and Jenckes families remained in the church, and they eventually got their way. James Brown's son, Captain James Brown (1698-1739), the founder of the family fortune, sired the famous four Brown brothers and their sister Mary.[12] and with that generation the grandchildren of the Elder James Brown and Joseph Jenckes triumphed in the laying-on-of-hands controversy. When Samuel Winsor died in 1758, he was succeeded as pastor by his son, also named Samuel; and when the younger Samuel Winsor was maneuvered out of the church by the Browns and Jenckeses in 1771, the strict adherence to the practice of laying-on-of-hands went with him. Indeed, his successor, Dr. James Manning (1738-1791), turned the Providence Baptist church back into a Particular Baptist church. The General Baptists lost in the great schism of 1771, and 47 percent of the members followed the younger Samuel Winsor out of the First Baptist Church, leaving it in the possession of Manning and his patrons, the Browns and the Jenckeses.[13]

We know that Nicholas Brown (1729-1791) and Daniel Jenckes had worked to achieve this objective because the Reverend Ezra Stiles, the minister of Newport's Second Congregational Church and the future president of Yale College, wrote in his diary on May 1, 1770, that the Baptist college (now Brown University) in Warren had voted to move to Providence, and that "the Browns and Jenkes intend to turn off Elder Windsor & put in President Manning for their minister." [14] Stiles knew about the plan a year before it came to fruition.

Nicholas Brown and Daniel Jenckes were wealthy merchants who wanted greater respectability and formality for the Providence church.[15] They were part of a movement among urban Baptists in Providence, Boston, Newport, New York, and Philadelphia to gain the respect of the more established denominations—the Anglicans, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. This effort included a number of initiatives: establishing a college to produce educated ministers (the college became Rhode Island's Brown University); introducing more formality in worship services; observing the Lord's Supper on a regular monthly schedule; placing a cloth on the communion table; eliminating such lesser rituals as foot washing and anointing with oil; keeping minutes of church business meetings; and taking away the right of women to speak and to vote. All of these things were accomplished in the Providence church by the 1790s, the last being the elimination of women as speakers and voters.

Another manifestation of this quest for respectability was the First Baptist Church's erection of its Meeting House in 1774-75, and the Browns were major figures in this undertaking. The new Meeting House on North Main Street, which replaced the congregation's small old meetinghouse up the street, represented a dramatic departure for Baptists in New England. Until then, Baptist meetinghouses were constructed in the New England plain meetinghouse style. The Baptist Meeting House in Providence was the first in New England to have a steeple, and many of the details were copied from the English Renaissance or Palladian style. While plain in many other respects, it was a radical declaration of a more formal and refined style. The Meeting House was, in fact, so shocking to the sensibilities of some Baptists that they denounced it as "popish." [16]

Nicholas and John Brown (1736-1803) were among the petitioners who in 1774 gained the Rhode Island General Assembly's charter for the Charitable Baptist Society, the legal entity that bought the property and built the building (and continues to own the Meeting House to this day). Nicholas Brown was named the society's first moderator, Joseph Brown (1733-1785) was selected to be the architect of the new meetinghouse, and John Brown was appointed the "Committee man for carrying on the building." John and some other men scouted certain Anglican and Congregational churches in Boston as models, but in the end they used a design book published by James Gibbs, the architect of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square in London.

The members of the Charitable Baptist Society did not have to be members of the church; in fact, not one of the men named in the charter was a church member, and only six of these thirty-nine men joined the Baptist church later.[17] Although Nicholas, Joseph, and John Brown all bought pews in the new meetinghouse, Joseph was the only one of the four Brown brothers ever to become a First Baptist Church member, and he was not baptized until April 2, 1775, when he was about forty-two years old.[18] Nicholas

and John were only “hearers” (attending but not joining the church), and Moses (1738-1836) renounced his Baptist upbringing to become a Quaker in 1773.

John Brown later resigned from the Charitable Baptist Society and gave up his pew. His letter, dated July 2, 1790, said he was resigning because of a “molishous lawsuit against me,” a suit whose principal promoters were

“several members of the [Baptist] Society who have lately opposed me in so unchristian, ungentleman & unfriendly a manner . . . in their late conduct in depriving me of the benefit of my slaves[.] I can not sitt at worship of the Supreme being till they purge themselves of their unheard of wickedness. I am with perfect respect and esteeme to every member of the Society but those Abommonable abolitioners.[19]

The abominable abolitionists included the church’s pastor, Dr. James Manning; former congressman David Howell, who was then moderator of the Charitable Baptist Society; Governor Arthur Fenner; George Benson, a partner with Nicholas Brown the elder (John’s brother) in the firm of Brown & Benson; and Nicholas Brown the younger (Nicholas the elder’s son). These members of the Charitable Baptist Society were also members of Moses Brown’s Abolition Society, which had brought an action against John that resulted in his having to relinquish a slave.[20] John bitterly complained to Moses that the Abolition Society “had as good a right to Claim his Coat on his Back as his Negro.”[21] Since John could not retaliate against the Abolition Society, he attacked the Charitable Baptist Society. The “Abommonable abolitioners” never purged themselves of their wickedness, and as far as is known, John Brown never came back to the First Baptist Church.

Nicholas Brown the younger (1769-1841) was a generous benefactor of the church. During his long association with it he served as the Charitable Baptist Society’s moderator for thirty years, donated money to buy a lot and build a parsonage, gave the clock that hangs in the auditorium of the meetinghouse today, furnished the magnificent organ, and owned several pews (so that the church would get full income from pew rents). He was the man for whom Brown University was named in 1804. He was extremely generous to the college over his lifetime, providing its first endowment, building Manning Hall and Hope College, and donating other gifts as well. His benefactions to Brown exceeded \$160,000, a substantial sum of money at the time.[22] But Nicholas Brown was never a member of the First Baptist Church — or any other church.

His sister, Hope Brown Ives (1773-1855), provided the great chandelier that has hung in the Meeting House since 1792, donating it in memory of their father, who had died the previous year. In 1837 she gave the church a silver-plated communion set, still used for the Lord’s Supper each month, and she and her husband, Thomas Poynton Ives, owned a pew in the church for sixty years. But it was not until 1840, when she was sixty-seven years old, that she was baptized. The church had installed a baptistry in the meetinghouse in 1837, but she insisted on an outdoor baptism in the Seekonk River.

The involvement of the Browns in the First Baptist Church diminished as the nineteenth century went on, and by 1900 they were gone. Several members of the family owned pews, and thus were part of the Charitable Baptist Society, but the Browns no longer participated in the society’s committees. Moses Brown Ives (1794-1857) and Robert Hale Ives (1798- 1878), sons of Hope Brown and Thomas Poynton Ives, both owned pews, but they never joined the church and took little part in its affairs. John Carter Brown (1797-1874), the son of Nicholas Brown the younger, owned a pew, but he too was never a member of the church, and the trustee of his estate sold the last Brown-owned pew in 1906.

It appears that the last church member who was closely related to the Brown family was Anne Brown Francis Woods (1828-1896), the wife of the industrialist and financier Marshall Woods.[23] She was doubly related, as her grandfather was Nicholas Brown the younger and her father was the grandson of Nicholas’s uncle John Brown.[24] No one named Brown is currently a member of Providence’s First Baptist Church in America, and no direct relation has been a member since the death of Anne Brown Francis Woods.

The Brown family's final connection with the First Baptist Meeting House was an unsolicited gift that caused a furor within the congregation. The grandchildren of Hope Brown Ives persuaded the leaders of the Charitable Baptist Society to include a stained-glass window in the back of the projection that was added to the building in 1884. These grandchildren, who were not members of the church, bought and donated a fine stained-glass window that memorialized their grandmother. It was a typical Episcopalian memorial window, inscribed "In Memory of Hope Brown Ives" at the bottom. The only memorial in the building, it was (and remains) totally incompatible with the architecture and spirit of the Meeting House, violating the plain style that used only clear glass windows. When it was installed without consultation with the members of the church, it occasioned an uproar, and it was soon covered with shutters.²⁵ The window was unshuttered in 2007, but since it is now behind the restored east wall of the auditorium, its presence does not clash with the plain style nor offend any of the worshipers inside.

For more information and educational materials on this subject, see under Education at www.rihs.org

Notes:

* J. Stanley Lemons is a professor emeritus of history at Rhode Island College and church historian of the First Baptist Church in America. This article is adapted from a talk the author presented at the Rhode Island Historical Society's John Brown House on March 20, 2008.

1. The desire for respectability may have been a factor here. Richard Hofstadter quotes what he calls "Protestant folk-lore": "A Methodist is a Baptist who wears shoes; a Presbyterian is a Methodist who has gone to college; and an Episcopalian is a Presbyterian who lives off his investments." Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963), 90.

2. See Isaac Backus, *A History of New England, with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptist* (Boston, 1777); Morgan Edwards, "Materials for a History of the Baptists in Rhode Island," manuscript, Rhode Island Historical Society, ca. 1770; David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1813); and every history of the First Baptist Church itself, beginning with John Stanford's account in 1789 (First Baptist Church in America MSS [FBCIA], Rhode Island Historical Society).

3. Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade and the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 9, 87, 129. Rappleye provides no documentation on this matter, and he probably consulted only old Brown family sources, such as Abby Isabel Buckley, *The Chad Browne Memorial, consisting of Genealogical Memories of a Portion of the Descendants of Chad and Elizabeth Browne, 1638-1888* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1888). By the late eighteenth century the Browns were making the claim that Chad Brown was the first pastor; see, e.g., the letter from Moses Brown to Francis Wayland in Reuben Aldrich Guild, *History of Brown University, with Illustrative Documents* (Providence: Providence Press, 1867), 207.

4. William Hague, *An Historical Discourse Delivered at the Celebration of the Second Centennial Anniversary of the First Baptist Church, in Providence, November 9, 1839* (Providence: B. Cranston, 1839), 8;

Reuben Aldrich Guild, *Early History of Brown, Including the Life, Times and Correspondence of President Manning, 1756-1791* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, 1897), 208.

5. J. Stanley Lemons, *First: The First Baptist Church in America* (Providence: Charitable Baptist Society, 2001), 13-15. See also Sydney James, *John Clarke and His Legacies: Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island, 1638-1670* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

6. Baptist clergy did not take the title "Reverend" until the nineteenth century, and this occurred only when increased formal education and a desire for general recognition of ministerial credentials became important. See William H. Brackney, *A Capsule History of Baptist Principles* (Atlanta: Baptist History and

Heritage Society, 2009), 77. The first pastor of Providence's First Baptist Church to be addressed as Reverend was Robert Pattison, who became the minister in 1830.

7. Lemons, *First*, 15.

8. The General Six-Principle Baptists rejected a paid or professional clergy. The Quakers abolished the clergy altogether in the seventeenth century. Both groups banned music from their worship services.

9. Lemons, *First*, 14; William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987), 67. General Baptists originally encouraged "she preachers" but the Particular Baptists did not, and a male-dominated clergy reigned by the end of the seven-teenth century. Brackney, *Capsule History*, p. 76.

10. With Martha Brown — the sister of James Brown, the church's eighth pastor — married to Joseph Jenckes, the Brown and Jenckes families were intermarried allies. Ebenezer Jenckes (1669-1726), the seventh pastor, had wanted to relax the practice of going under hands; his brother Joseph (1656-1740), who was governor of Rhode Island from 1727 to 1732, wanted the church to become more sophisticated and respectable by having a college-educated, professional minister and by discarding various practices of the Six-Principle Baptists, such as going under hands and foot washing.

11. Backus, *History of New England*, 2: 23; Samuel Lunt Caldwell and William Gammell, *History of the First Baptist Church in Providence, 1639- 1877* (Providence, 1877), 10.

12. Capt. James Brown, his wife Hope Power (1702-1792), and their daughter Mary (Brown) Vanderlight (1731- 1795) were all baptized members of the First Baptist Church.

13. Among the secessionists were 17 Winsors, 7 Dyers, 8 Carpenters, 8 Spragues, 4 Fenners, 4 Kings, and a number of Eddys, Jenckeses, Dexters, Burlingames, and Higgenbottoms. See Lemons, *First*, 18-19.

14. *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 49.

15. The family alliance continued with the marriage of Nicholas Brown to his cousin Rhoda Jenckes (1741-1783), the daughter of Daniel Jenckes (1701- 1774) and Joanna Jenckes (1703- 1796). Daniel was the son of Gov. Joseph Jenckes and Martha (Brown) Jenckes.

16. Lemons, *First*, 25-26

17. Five of the six were baptized on April 2, 1775, as the meetinghouse neared completion. All of the baptisms took place outdoors in frigid weather. Conversion in that time required a strong commitment and a sturdy constitution.

18. Joseph Brown was one of nine persons baptized that day. Four of the others were African Americans, including Providence Brown, a slave freed by Moses Brown in 1773.

19. John Brown to the Charitable Baptist Society, July 2, 1790, Charitable Baptist Society folder, FBCIA.

20. The incident that led to John Brown's resignation from the Charitable Baptist Society is recounted in John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003), 225-26.

21. *Ibid.*, 226.

22. See Lemons, *First*, 25, 40, 41, 43; James B. Hedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantations: The Nineteenth Century* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1968), *passim*; Walter C. Bronson, *History of Brown University, 1764-1914* (Providence: Brown University, 1914), *passim*.

23. Both parents of Marshall Woods had been members of the First Baptist Church, but he himself never joined, although he owned a pew with his wife.

24. The Browns married into other families, including the Gammells, as their connections expanded. The last Gammell member of the church was Asa Messer Gammell, who died in 1903.

25. Lemons, *First*, 56, 59-60.