Samuel Wait Biography

Samuel Wait was born on December 19, 1789 in White Creek, New York. He grew up in Granville, New York, and later moved to Middletown, Vermont. Samuel Wait's parents were not "professors of religion" but his grandfather, William Wait, a Baptist minister, lived with the family and saw to Samuel's moral and religious instruction. Wait was baptized on March 12, 1809 and joined the Baptist church in Middletown. Thirty years later Wait would baptize his parents, Joseph and Martha, into the fellowship of that same church. Wait felt a calling to preach the gospel and began to prepare for the ministry by studying Greek and Hebrew at Salem Academy in Washington County. He was licensed to preach for one year by the Baptist Church in Middletown and in 1816 accepted a call as minister of the Baptist Church in Sharon, Massachusetts, where he was ordained on June 3, 1818.

It was during his time in Sharon that Wait met Sarah [Sally] Merriam of Brandon, Vermont. In her journal Sally never mentions Samuel by name, and only once refers to him as "Mr. W." Sally wrote very little in her journal regarding her relationship with Wait, and no letters between the two during this period exist. Some evidence suggests that Sally's brother Jonathan introduced the couple. In 1816 the couple agreed to start corresponding and, a year later, in February 1817, they became engaged. The couple was married on June 17, 1818, several weeks after Samuel's ordination.

Samuel Wait wrote to a cousin, "I have great work to perform and I am anxious to begin it. It is an arduous and tiresome work to get ready, but I dare not begin until I feel some strength to meet the infidel on his own ground, and this strength at this day must be derived from study." It was this need for continued study that led Wait to join his brothers-in-law Issac and Jonathan Merriam in Philadelphia in 1820 where he enrolled in the Theological Institution of the Baptist General Convention to study with Dr. William Staughton. Due to their limited funds, Sally Wait remained in New England where she ran a millinery from their house and began producing straw bonnets, the profits from which she sent to support Samuel.

In 1821 William Staughton was appointed the first President of Columbian College (now George Washington University) and moved to Washington, DC. The Theological Institution was absorbed by Columbian, and Samuel Wait followed Staughton to Washington to continue his studies. Wait was employed as a tutor in the College and later served as the first principal for the Columbian College Preparatory School. Soon after, in the winter of 1822, Sally joined her husband in Washington DC. It was the first time the couple had seen each other in over two and a half years.

Since Columbian College did not confer degrees at that time, Wait received an M.A. degree from Waterville College (now Colby College) in Maine in 1825. Waterville College was an established Baptist institution that awarded degrees to students attending schools still awaiting accreditation. Wait would eventually receive an honorary degree from Columbian in 1834.

While the Waits were still living in Washington, DC, their first child, Ann Eliza, was born on February 1, 1826. Only a few months later, Columbian College's dire financial problems forced the Board of Trustees to send President Staughton and Samuel Wait into the South to solicit funds. While on this journey, a freak accident occurred that would have important ramifications for Samuel Wait and the state of North Carolina. In his diary, Wait recalls an incident in which a spooked horse destroyed the wagon in which he and Staughton were traveling, forcing them back to the city of New Bern for
repairs. Later, Wait's son-in-law, John Brewer, believed that it was this visit to New Bern that ultimately resulted in Samuel Wait moving his family south.

Thomas Meredith, another of Staughton's students and the former minister of the Baptist congregation in New Bern, had given Samuel Wait a letter of introduction to the First Baptist Church of New Bern. Wait was invited to preach while in New Bern on several occasions and proved to be popular with the congregation. As the financial problems at Columbian College continued, both Staughton and Wait resigned their positions. Wait was soon asked to serve as the minister of New Bern Baptist Church, and in the fall of 1827 he moved his family south. Samuel Wait wrote to his wife in 1827, "To tell the whole truth, I do not know of a more important opening. The state of the ministry all around in that region is deplorable."

In 1827 there were only five trained Baptist ministers in North Carolina, including Wait, and all of them had served as pastors at New Bern. These men were anguished over the lack of education for ministers and what they felt to be the flight of North Carolina's brightest to neighboring states in search of education. The general indifference and conflicting beliefs among many North Carolina Baptists only hardened the resolve of these five ministers, and in March of 1830 at the Anniversary of the Benevolent Society in Greenville the North Carolina Baptist State Convention was formed.

Samuel Wait served as pastor in New Bern Baptist Church until 1830. Wait wrote to Leavill Hewins on March 10, 1830 "The church is very liberal; in this respect, like the brethren and sisters in Sharon, but they have not sufficient strength to give me an entire support. Being confined in school, and, of course, unable to preach any in the surrounding country as I at first intended, I became convinced, as I saw no prospect of any change, that it was my duty to resign." Wait did resign and had every intention of returning to New England but before he left he attended the meeting in Greenville and was appointed General Agent of the Baptist State Convention.

It was during this period that tragedy struck the Wait family. Samuel was busy traveling and preaching on behalf of the Convention when Sally received news that her only sister was in ill health back in Vermont. Although she had recently given birth to William Cary, the Waits' second child in 1829, Sally went home to attend to her sister. While still in Vermont, and only a few months after her sister's death, William Cary contracted a fever and died suddenly on New Year's Day 1831. Samuel did not hear of his son's death until April 1831 and wrote to Sally at once asking her to return to North Carolina. He spent the next three years traveling across the state with his family in a wagon soliciting money and support for this new institution.

It was the Convention's mission to establish a school for the purpose of training young men to be ministers and in 1833 the Convention authorized the purchase of a farm fifteen miles south of Raleigh in Wake County from Dr. Calvin Jones. To help defray tuition costs, the Convention endorsed a program of manual labor and in 1834, with 70 students enrolled, Wake Forest Manual Labor Institute opened. Having had experience with higher education contributed to Samuel Wait being chosen as the school's first president. Wait believed that the manual labor plan would instill "industrious habits" among the students while promoting the good health that derives from hard work. Wait often worked in the fields alongside the students although the plan proved to be unpopular and in 1839, after the state legislature had amended the charter, the school became Wake Forest College. Samuel Wait would serve as President until 1845 and was a member of the Board of Trustees until his death in 1867.

After leaving Wake Forest, Wait served as a minister in several churches. In 1849 Wake Forest College awarded him an honorary doctor of divinity degree. In 1851 he became the first President of Oxford Female Seminary in Oxford, North Carolina, where he remained until his retirement in 1857. Samuel Wait returned to Wake Forest where he could often be seen on campus strolling with his walking stick in hand, still thinking of ideas for the promotion of the College. During this time he wrote a letter in
which he discussed the formation of Wake Forest College. In September 1882 the letter appeared as an article in The Student Magazine entitled "The Origins and Early History of Wake Forest College".

Samuel Wait died on July 28, 1867. Sally Wait died on June 16, 1871. Both are buried in Wake Forest, North Carolina.