"Duty" Against Family: A Vermont Minister Adopts A Slave State

By RONALD WACHS

A BAPTIST MINISTER from Vermont, travelling through North Carolina in 1827, found there "several preachers who spend all their time among a very ignorant people." Within a matter of weeks, Samuel Wait decided that it was his "duty" to be a missionary in the deprived and depraved region. For the next forty years this transplanted Vermonter worked to shape religious and educational institutions of his adopted state.

After a brief tenure as a parish minister, Wait helped organize the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, and then served as first president of the denomination's Wake Forest College from 1834 until 1845. Following a second parish tenure, at Yanceyville, he returned to higher education as president of the Oxford Female College (1851-1856). At the same time, he presided over Wake Forest's Board of Trustees.

Following his death in 1867, the State Convention mourned Wait's passing and paid tribute to his zealous efforts. "Though born and reared in a distant state," it noted, Wait had been "in the providence of God, a pioneer and leader among us, aiding us as no other man has, in laying the foundations of our educational interests, in organizing our benevolent enterprises and in building up the structure of our denominational and state efforts." Wait paid a high personal price for this deserved praise because his prominence in North Carolina meant a diminution of Vermont ties, including those of his family. Having adopted a Southern home, Wait experienced personally the nation's growing sectional animosities and polarizations.

Wait's decision to settle in North Carolina reflected his participation in the religious currents of his era. A convert in the Second Great Revival which swept the entire eastern United States in the early 19th century, Wait espoused that movement's heaven-oriented, evangelical theology and particularly its zeal to carry the gospel to destitute

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I. Unless otherwise noted, all manuscript material cited is from the Samuel Wait Papers, Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Samuel Wait, New Bern, N.C., March 10, 1830, to L. Hewins; Minutes of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, 1867, pp. 25-28. (Hereinafter cited as NCBSCM.)
regions. Born in 1789 in Washington County, New York, he early "made a public profession of... religion." Shortly after his conversion, Wait moved with his family to Tinmouth, Vermont. Baptists in the town attended the church in nearby Middletown, where the Reverend Sylvanus Haynes was pastor. Among Vermont Baptists, Haynes had a reputation as a writer and a minister of prominence. In 1804, the Vermont phase of the Great Revival began in his church, and here, too, in 1809 he baptized Samuel Wait.2

Wait received a common school education until he was seventeen years old. Subsequently, he taught school for several years. Believing himself called to be a Baptist minister, he undertook the arduous preparations which he considered necessary to make his work more effective. He enrolled in Salem Academy in Washington County, New York, where he studied Latin and Greek. By 1815, his religious progress was such that the Middletown church granted him credentials to exercise his "gift" of preaching. After this, he studied theology for a year and a half under the instruction of the Reverend A. Fisher. In 1816, the Sharon, Massachusetts, Baptist Church called him as pastor for a year and agreed to pay a salary of two hundred dollars. Wait's ministerial efforts satisfied the congregation and he was fully ordained there in 1818.3

Although now almost thirty years old, Wait still felt the necessity of further theological training. Consequently, in 1819, he enrolled in the theological school directed by Dr. William Waitan, minister of the Sanborn Street Baptist Church in Philadelphia. Because of Stoughton's "fears that having a wife would impede the progress of a student," Wait went alone to Philadelphia, leaving behind his recent bride, the former Sarah Merriam of Brandon, Vermont. Their separation lasted two years and seven months.4

In September, 1821, the Philadelphia school moved to Washington, D.C., to become the Theological Department of the new Columbian College. Wait, who had completed the course of study in Philadelphia, enrolled in the new school. The following year, he was appointed a tutor at Columbian with an annual stipend of "two hundred dollars and... board." This financial security permitted Mrs. Wait to rejoin her husband in Washington. Almost immediately, however, the college's budgetary problems threatened to disrupt their domestic tranquility. The prospect ultimately arose that Mrs. Wait would have to board at the school, meaning a suspension of their living together. In Wait's opinion, the chief villain was Luther Rice, former missionary to Burma and now college treasurer. Rice's political infighting with the college's governing board was significant in determining the course of Wait's subsequent career.5

In the summer of 1826, the Triennial Meeting of the Baptist General Convention concluded that Rice had been "a very loose accountant, and had very imperfect talents for the disbursement of money." As a political compromise, Rice had received the coveted nomination as a school trustee in return for signing a statement which was regarded as a relinquishment of "all concern in the disbursements of the monied concerns of the College." Following the meeting, a revamped Columbian Board of Trustees relieved Rice of most of his remaining financial duties. Though pleased with these developments, Wait, nonetheless, had been annoyed in late June by Rice's intrusion into his personal financial matters, and by late August, 1826, the tutor resigned. On leaving Washington, Wait received a letter of commendation signed by the college president and faculty.6

By that time, Wait had begun a search for what he called his "duty"...
in other areas. The idea of a permanent settlement exercised his thoughts, especially after the Sharon church issued its second call within two years. Writing to his wife's uncle, John Conant, in Brandon, Vermont, Wait reasoned that perhaps God had something for him to do at Sharon; otherwise, he could not understand the periodic tugging from that parish. Returning to Sharon represented to Wait the fulfillment of a deeply felt need to settle down. Lamenting the fact that he had known no "continuing city" in life, he said that he had "about resolved" that his next step would be towards a place that afforded "at least an appearance of permanency."

Rather than seeking this permanency immediately after leaving Washington, Wait visited Niagara Falls and began considering a move either to the Southern or Western United States. At the same time, the new Columbian Board of Trustees conceived a plan to relieve the money pressures on the school. Dr. Stoughton, the president, was to conduct a solicitation tour through the South. Wait was importuned to accompany him; and, though his brother-in-law, Jonathan Merriam, assured Wait that employment awaited him in Vermont, he acceded to the numerous requests and committed himself to the southern town.

Writing to his wife less than a month after his departure, the thirty-seven-year-old Wait reiterated his "long[ing] for the time when [he] [should] have a permanent abode and allowed to occupy it." The Sharon congregation again tried to induce him to return: "I wish you would come and make Sharon a visit and see if there is not as much work as any faithful man can do for God. I know not what to write to bring you to Sharon if I did I would do it." Merriam and Conant renewed the plea that "the Vermont Convention have great need of a suitable [sic] person as an agent to circulate in the state as their agent, could you not come soon." Others learned of Wait's lack of employment and the knowledge set into motion a chain of events which would eventually preclude his return to New England.

While travelling through Edenton, North Carolina, Wait met Thomas Meredith, another former student of Dr. Stoughton's and also former minister of the Baptist Church in New Bern, North Carolina. Knowing that the New Bern church was without a minister, Meredith wrote a letter of introduction for Wait. On his way through New Bern with Stoughton, Wait preached four times for the Baptists and twice for the Presbyterians. The Baptists invited him to return and "said as much . . . about becoming their pastor" as they thought proper on so short acquaintance. On his part, Wait "gave them no encouragement," indicating his preference to live "somewhere in the neighborhood of my parents."

His wife had no knowledge of these developments when she wrote Wait of the death of his former pastor, Sylvanus Haynes, in Middle-town, and conveyed the news that he had been suggested as an eligible replacement. This prospect appealed to Mrs. Wait who acknowledged that she "long[ed] for the time when we may be permitted to dwell by our own fireside." Wait had also thought about domestic permanence but his descriptions indicated that New Bern had charmed him: "The Chh seems the most like our old friends in Sharon of any that I have seen since we came from Mass." As for the city, it was "the largest town in N.C . . . [with] about 8000 inhabitants." Confessing that he had earlier held misconceptions about health hazards in the South, Wait now observed that "Northerners in many places in this country do as well as they can at the North." Satisfied that New Bern would be a good place to settle, Wait nonetheless felt that his personal preference could not be the only deciding factor; a further matter remained: satisfying his sense of "duty."

This, too, he had considered. "Although my feelings revolt at the idea of living 800 miles from all our dear kindred, it may yet be our duty to come to N.C." While he taught at Columbian College, the Waits had briefly entertained the idea of going to Burma as missionaries, but had been dissuaded by a torrent of letters from Vermont relatives, primarily Mrs. Wait's parents and brother. Now the mis-

7. His files show that he communicated about work with the church in Sharon with his former pastor, Sylvanus Haynes, and with Peter Chase about teaching in a new academy in Hinesburg, Vermont. Jonathan Merriam, Junior, his brother-in-law, wrote Wait that he could probably travel as agent for the Vermont Baptist State Convention. Merriam and his uncle, John Conant of Brandon, had been prime movers in organizing the state group in October, 1824. Conant was Chairman of the Board of Trustees, therefore any offers of employment with the Vermont College Hill, July 4, 1826, to Conant.


9. Wait, Norfolk, Virginia, January 15, 1827, to Sally Wait. Original spelling and punctuation will be maintained throughout unless otherwise noted by use of brackets [ ]; Leavitt Hewins, Canton, Massachusetts, February 15, 1827, to Wait; Jonathan Merriam, Junior, Bridport, Vermont, February 12, 1827, and John Conant, Brandon, Vermont, February 25, 1827, to Wait.

sionary zeal reappeared. "To tell the whole truth," he wrote his wife, "I do not know of a more important opening — The state of the ministry all around in that region is deplorable." Being yet under obligation to complete the terms of his solicitation with Dr. Staughton, Wait postponed a definite decision about staying at the Columbian College Board of Trustees and thereby regaining control of that body. Consequently, on March 27, Wait resigned his agency and on April 10, returned to New Bern for a trial pastorate in the Baptist Church.12

During the interim, Mrs. Wait wrote him several letters expressing her concern about New Bern as a place to live and questioning their duty to move so far from New England. Wait was certain that it was a suitable place to settle permanently; and though she doubted this, she was willing to come if duty to God demanded it. For the next two months, Wait tried to resolve this question of "duty." Finally, his understanding crystallized. Professedly, it was based on the conviction that "he was not his own, but belonged to his God," and that his Christian exertions would be acceptable to God only if he followed "Duty." Although there were openings in New England, he felt none could compare with New Bern and its needs.13

This unequivocal call to duty, coupled with the prospect of finally having a permanent home, caused Wait to move his family to North Carolina in the autumn of 1827. In Vermont, Wait's mother-in-law, Sarah Merriam, called their departure a "Jonah's trip," advising that "if the gourd begins to wither think of the Northern states [.] I have a strong presentiment that your stay there will be short." Often during the ensuing years, she emphatically expressed her opinion that their duty called them to Sharon, the site of Wait's first pastorate, rather than New Bern. She never concealed her desire to have them near her.

Mrs. Wait's brother, Isaac Merriam, suggested another reason why they might soon leave New Bern — he did not believe that they could long endure the sight of slavery. Long after his Northern relatives realized that Wait had no intention of returning, they continued to upbraid him for living in a slave-holding region. These exhortations from Vermont kinsmen dramatically illustrated the growing national divisions over the slavery controversy.14

In addition to relatives, other Northerners expressed reservations about Wait's decision and attempted to attract him to New England. The Sharon Church repeated its efforts to induce him back. Other job offers came from Irah Chase, President of a Baptist theological school in Newton, Massachusetts, and Alvah Sabin, a Vermont minister, who thought that "none but good men & educated men like Br. Wait" would be suitable to assume pastorates in the Burlington area.

On at least one occasion, the call for assistance was reversed. Wait evidently attempted to persuade another Vermont brother-in-law, Jonathan Merriam, to come to the South. This provoked Mrs. Wait's uncle, John Conant, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Vermont Baptist State Convention, to scold: "Don't try to get Elder Merriam from this quarter for we cannot spare him. Our ministers are leaving so fast I fear we shall have none left."15

Despite attempts to cause his return, Wait retained his concern for the New Bern work and soon enjoyed the esteem of his fellow ministers. His experience had quickly confirmed his earlier observations about the condition of organized religion in his new home. Years later he recollected that never in his life had he "witnessed such a mortifying prostration of almost every trait by which a gospel church ought to be distinguished" as he encountered in North Carolina at the time. Eventually, however, the financial liabilities of the New Bern call forced Wait to reappraise his situation. As the church roll numbered only thirty-two members in 1828, and thirty in 1829, Wait found it financially necessary to keep a school, contrary to his original intentions. In late 1829, seeing no prospect for improvement, he decided that it was his duty to resign. Immediately he thought of returning to New England. While negotiating with various New England churches, Sharon included, Wait learned that others also considered North Caro-

11. Sally Wait, White Creek, New York, February 6, 1827, to Wait; Wait, Charleston, S.C., March 10, 1827, to Sally Wait; Jonathan, Senior, and Sarah Merriam, Brandon, Vermont, April 7 and 9, 1823, to Wait; Achsah Olin, Brandon, February 15, 1823, to Sally Wait.
12. Wait, Diary.
13. Sally Wait, White Creek, New York, April 15, 1827, to Wait; Wait, New Bern, April 30, 1827, to Sally Wait; Wait, Diary, May 14, 17, and 20 and June 1, 1827; Wait, New Bern, June 11, 1827, to Anne Eliza Wait.
15. Leavitt Hewins, Canton, Massachusetts, February 12, 1828, to Wait; Irah Chase, Newton, Massachusetts, January 31, 1829, to Wait; Jonathan Merriam, Junior, Bridport, Vermont, February 16, 1830, to Wait; John Conant, Brandon, November 6, 1828, to Wait. Merriam ultimately left Vermont, but for Illinois, not North Carolina.
lina a mission area and advised him to apply for financial support to prolong his missionary activities. The Baptist Missionary Society of Massachusetts commissioned him to work for thirteen weeks at a rate of five dollars per week. This development caused Wait to postpone negotiations for returning to Sharon, which he further noted was “out of sight and influence of slavery.” Being one of only five college-trained Baptist ministers in the state, Wait concluded that it would be wrong for him to leave North Carolina “should a door open for me to devote my whole time to the ministry.” He assured his former parish that within six weeks he should know his course of action.16

While the Waits pondered their future, his mother-in-law admonished them that there were at least three justifications for their departure: Samuel’s wife had been extremely ill and her mother interpreted this as a divine warning to leave; further, to raise their children in a slave land would endanger their souls. Finally, she candidly advised them that “it is generally thought that you have missed your way and of course not as yet entered the field of your future destined labour.” Contrary to Mrs. Merriam’s belief when she wrote these harsh words to the Waits, Samuel Wait indeed was about to enter his “future destined labour,” but it was in North Carolina, not Vermont.

In late March, 1830, Wait played a major role in the establishment of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention. This body claimed as its twin purposes the education of young men for the ministry and the promotion of domestic and foreign missions. To promote the Convention and its programs, the delegates decided that an agent was needed to visit the churches of the state, explain the new endeavor, and invite their cooperation. For this position of responsibility they elected Samuel Wait, offering as compensation thirty-five dollars per month, but making no provisions for his expenses. Feeling that the door was opening for him to devote full time to his North Carolina mission, in early June, Wait began his new work.


17. Sarah Merriam, Brandon, April 25, 1830, to Waits: “At any rate, the thoughts of the South is very appalling to me . . . all I have conversed with think that it will be altogether best for you to return toward the North.”

Within a month, he wrote that he felt certain that he was “in the path of duty.” Yet, since their financial condition was still tenuous, the Waits found it necessary to suspend temporarily their housekeeping. Consequently, Mrs. Wait and their two children returned to New England for an extended visit with relatives. Being away from her husband caused her to lament that she felt “empty and desolate in returning . . . without you notwithstanding our children are with me.”

Once back in New England, Mrs. Wait discovered a situation that made her glad that her husband, who was a member of the Masonic order, had not accepted a New England parish that spring. She wrote him that “the Antimasonic fever rages so high that it would have been impossible for you to have taken any ground on which you could have avoided censure . . . Some ministers have renounced masonry in very foolish language.”18

Meanwhile, Wait continued his work in North Carolina. In the autumn of 1830, he participated in a Baptist camp meeting near Chapel Hill. He vividly described for his wife the noise, confusion, and excitement attendant upon such a meeting. It was a new phenomenon for the New Englander, and he resolved that, though these “big meetings” had value, if matters were left to his direction he “would work less on the passions, and try to put more good sense into the sermons.” His travels further reinforced Wait’s awareness of the needs of his adopted region. “Our friends in New England favored as many of them are with an enlightened ministry, can have only very imperfect ideas of the wants of the region around me.”19

18. NCBSM, 1830, pp. 17, 18, 20; Ibid., 1831, p. 10; Wait, June 21, 1830, to Sally Wait; Wait, Diary, August 5, 1830; and Sally Wait, New York City, August 16, 1830, to Wait; Sally Wait, Brandon, September 9, 1830, to Wait. She continued: “The Oimis and the Conants, excepting Uncle J. C. are all anti-Masons. Young J. A. Conant was yesterday elected to represent this town to the legislature, by the Antimasons.” Her brother had earlier written Wait that “Whiting [Vermont] would work more on the passions, and try to put more good sense into the sermons.” His travels further reinforced Wait’s awareness of the needs of his adopted region. “Our friends in New England favored as many of them are with an enlightened ministry, can have only very imperfect ideas of the wants of the region around me.”19
His agency appointment having been only for one year, Wait pondered his future course of duty as the second session of the state convention approached. There yet remained a professed desire to return to New England if it could be done with a clear conscience. His awareness of the vast work to be done in North Carolina, however, had increased during the preceding year; and he debated whether it would be justifiable "to leave such a large field where labourers are so much wanted."

Members of the state convention expressed their total satisfaction with Wait’s labors and requested that he continue for another year. They agreed to pay him one dollar per day and indicated that private funds were available to raise his salary to 550 dollars. Commenting on this development Wait wrote:

What could I do? I almost wished I had never seen N.C. My labours have been more blessed during the past year than they ever were in one year before. Besides, we could not do without an Agent, and there was no other of whom they would think for one moment to fill my place. To tell you all in a word I have consented to engage again as Agent of the Convention and concluded not to go North till one year from next fall. Tell my dear mother that I have come to this conclusion with many tears.

Deriving much satisfaction from his work and enjoying more financial security, Wait now wanted his wife to rejoin him. On July 1, 1831, after a separation of almost a year, Wait met his family and soon made arrangements for their travelling with him. For the next two years they lived in a covered wagon as he continued his travels.20

Wait’s mother-in-law remained adamantly opposed to their living in the slave-holding region of the nation. Following the Nat Turner slave uprising in August, 1831, Mrs. Merriam complained that her daughter had written "nothing of the Negro insurrections prehabs she thinks we don’t know anything about it." The short duration of Wait’s appointment consoled her somewhat: "I flatter myself that you will get enough of the slave states by the time your year is out and be longing for a land of liberty and your eyes turned this way." Again, her wishes failed to materialize.21

Following Wait’s second annual report, the Convention requested him to continue on the same terms as the previous year. Now no second thoughts about returning to New England plagued him. He had taken a long step forward in casting his lot in North Carolina. At the same session, the Convention made another decision which would in time seal Wait’s permanency.

The delegates unanimously voted to buy a farm on which to begin a “Baptist Literary Institution . . . on the Manual Labor Principle.” Wait was one of a committee of four to choose a principal. On December 19, 1832. — Wait’s 43rd birthday — the committee met and the other members requested him to take charge of the projected Wake Forest Institute. Though he deferred a definite decision, he indicated that his acceptance was likely. In May, 1833, he accepted the position, though his primary efforts during the remainder of the year continued to be the fulfillment of his duties as Convention agent. Following his 1833 report — his last as agent before beginning his work at the Wake Forest school — the Convention commended Wait for the “discretion, the faithfulness and the success” with which he had discharged the difficult duties of Agent.

Having devoted all his energies for four years to efforts to improve the religious climate of North Carolina. Samuel Wait was no longer an alien sojourner, but had identified thoroughly with the religious destinies of his adopted state. Others recognized the fusion of interests, such as the individual who sent Wait ten dollars and best wishes for the “prosperity of the Convention with which your own happiness is identified.”22

North Carolina Baptists read favorable comments about Wait's qualifications as Principal of Wake Forest. Editor Thomas Meredith of the North Carolina Baptist Interpreter told his readers that the school's Trustees highly regarded Wait's work and acknowledged that it was to “his prudence, his disinterested zeal, his indefatigable exertion, — that the school was chiefly indebted for its existence.” Wait needed all these attributes because until 1835 he had no faculty assistance in caring for over seventy students.23

Having identified themselves with North Carolina, the Waits experienced a cooling in their relations with their Northern kinsmen.

20. Wait, Anson County, N.C., January 11, 1831, to Sally Wait; Wait, Wake County, N.C., April 21, to Sally Wait; Wait, Diary, July 1 and 8, 1831; J. B. Brower, “Life of Dr. Samuel Wait,” pp. 15-16; While at the 1831 convention, Wait received a letter from his wife telling of the death of his infant son in New England.


22. Ibid., p. 6; Samuel Wait, “The Origin and Early History of Wake Forest College,” pp. 50-51; Wait, Diary; The Baptist Interpreter (N.C.), January 13, 1833, and June 1833; NCBSCM, 1833, pp. 15-16, 6; Nat G. Smith, Mays Chapel, September 9, 1833, to Wait.

23. Interpreter, June, 1834; William T. Brooks, Alumni Address, Wake Forest College, 1859, Ms in William T. Brooks Papers, Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University.
Slavery was the point of contention. By 1835, the Abolitionists had begun to arouse the righteous ire of many Northerners against the institution of slavery. Brandon, the home of many of Mrs. Wait's relatives, was an important area of anti-slavery activity in Vermont. Wait accepted the system, at least overtly, and Wake Forest had two slaves working there. When Mrs. Wait's brother and sister-in-law contemplated a move from Vermont for their health, the Waits invited them to move to North Carolina. The Merriams expressed their appreciation for the interest in their welfare, but vowed that "nothing but a sense of duty or absolute necessity will induce us to take up our residence in the midst of a slaveholding population." Mrs. Merriam stated her sentiments more bluntly: "Our strong and prevailing objection to the South is slavery, slavery."

In 1835, another relative, John Conant, of Brandon, reflected the Vermont's increased awareness of the slavery issue caused by the activities of the Abolitionists:

Abolition principles are preaching of by many beyond justification. I suppose the people [?] of the South do not know how to [original mangled beyond recognition] or git rid of slavery, the best way seems to be the question on this there is much division of sentiment. Are the people of the South anxiously desirous of getting rid of the evil, and do they prescribe any way to accomplish the object. The curse on our country is great and requires an over ruling [?] providence to set them right.

Indicative of the growing divisiveness was an 1836 exchange between two of Mrs. Wait's brothers. Charles Merriam had come to Wake Forest to assist in the operation of the school and evidently he was not totally offended by the existence of slave labor there. He wrote his brother, Mylon, who was a student in Waterville, Maine, to "beware of getting into the Abolition spirit." In reply, Mylon cogently expressed the changing attitude of many Northerners:

I do intend to be prudent, and take care neither to put out the eyes, nor out the ears of the slaveholders so that they can neither see nor hear of the sin of slavery. But if you meant that I should not speak of it as an enormous sin, and as such worthy of the reprobation of every philanthropist and Christian. I think you have wrong views of our duty, and mistake the leading principles of moral reform. I do not approve of the views and measures of some of the Abolitionists I think that time is necessary to effect the emancipation of Slaves, but this does not excuse us from taking proper measures to effect it as soon as possible. In any cause of moral reform opposition should not be sought by those endeavoring to effect such a reform, but they should avoid it as far as they can consistently with their object which should be speedily accomplished. But the same spirit of opposition has existed in a reform on every other subject as exists on this. I have said much more on this subject than I intended; but it seems to me that it involved principles which should never be surrendered, indeed which we are morally bound never to yield. But after all, this class as you say is more to be pitied than censured in some respects, but if they take no measures to better their conditions they will be both pitiable and censurable.

In 1837, needing additional faculty, Wait inquired of Isaac Merriam about the availability of J. B. White, a native of Illinois engaged to Merriam's daughter. Merriam answered that while he did not know what compensation Wake Forest might offer White, nonetheless, he confessed, he had always "had objections to having the destinies of any of my friends connected with the slave-holding communities." Then he added to his brother-in-law who had been in North Carolina for ten years: "I suppose time & use may accustom us to it so that our feelings may not be shocked by its moral enormity. Still I have no doubt if these communities do not do justice to the enslaved—'God will come down to deliver them—then woe to the oppressor.' Some of Wait's Vermont correspondents were expressing an insincerity on the slavery question which intensified in later years.

Familial relations did not totally sour as a result of the slavery controversy. In contrast with the caustic comments that often characterized letters from the Merriams, Wait's relations with his own parents remained especially warm until his mother's death in 1854. Occasionally, he travelled North to visit his family. On one such occasion, in 1837, he baptized his elderly parents. As he attended the sessions of the Baptist Triennial Convention in New York in 1838, he possibly used this occasion to visit Northern relatives again. The following year, Wait and his cousin, W. Z. Waite, of Granville, New York, renewed their correspondence which lasted until the North Carolinian's death. Wait's letters are not known to be extant, but those of his Northern cousin provide lucid commentary on numerous local and national

24. John Myers, "The Beginning of Anti-Slavery Agencies in Vermont," Vermont History, XXXVI (Summer, 1968), 100, 101, 139. ibid., "The Major Efforts of Anti-Slavery in Vermont, 1836-1838," ibid. (Autumn, 1968), 217-18, 225-27. Wait, sumpse, Vermont, May 7, 1834, to Waits. Merriam's attitude on slavery was long on Friday last for ravishing a white woman. & nineteen-all slaves were sentenced to these are some of the blessings of slavery." Norfolk, Virginia, July 29, 1822; John


26. Isaac Merriam, December 1, 1837, to Wait.
events which he termed the "great political questions of the day as well as those of a moral nature."

In his first letter, W. Z. Waite observed that "the nation appears to be on the verge of some great revolution." This danger had arisen according to his analysis because "the North and the South are cherishing a spirit of discord among themselves," with "publications at the North irritating the South increasingly, while every exhibition of illegal punishment at the South creates a tenfold zeal at the North." He concluded apprehensively "all these things must end somewhere, but where God only knows."27

Just as the Waits were feeling the disapproval of some Northern relatives, the churches in the South were under attack by elements within the Northern churches over the morality of the slave system. At its 1835 session, the North Carolina Baptist State Convention counterattacked with a resolution declaring "the late fanatical proceedings touching the subject of abolition are uncalled for, intrusive, and pernicious, and that as such they have our most unqualified disapprobation." With sectional discord permeating the structures of organized religion, W. Z. Waite lamented that "... slavery and antislavery" had produced "contention among the professed followers of Christ." In 1840, replying to Northern Baptist decrees of non-fellowship with slaveholders, North Carolina Baptists expressed their opinion that "the movement [sic] of Northern abolitionists are uncalled for in themselves, and schismatical [sic] and mischievous in their tendency." The following year, the Raleigh Baptist Association of the state convention termed the Northerners "busybodies" and resolved that it was "inexpedient that the Baptists of the South should co-operate with the Abolitionists at the North, in any of our institutions of benevolence."28

Waite remained aloof from these arguments. Instead of focusing on social concerns, he like many Southern clergymen of the day advocated a personal piety that expressed itself in moral conduct and the saving of souls. His letter of instructions to the Convention missionaries

embarking upon a year's work within the state revealed Wait's preoccupation with "spiritual" matters and his aversion to becoming involved in temporal controversies. "Your primary business will be," he told them, "of course, to preach the gospel." As far as the "exciting questions ... [agitating] the public mind," he expressed his hope that their discretion would dictate complete silence.

He practiced his preaching. Rufus Babcock, an associate from earlier times, praised Wait for "holding on [to] the even tenor of your way endeavoring noiselessly to do good to the minds and thence to the bodies and souls of all around you." Coming at a time when "the rabid zeal of some ... among us cool northerners [was] threatening to turn the world upside down and tear the union of our churches and next of our States in sunder," Wait's position, Babcock maintained, was "enviable compared with modern agitators."29

As President of Wake Forest, Wait devoted his primary attention to promoting its welfare. In 1839, the state legislature issued a charter giving the new status of Wake Forest College. Even so, President Wait found that much of his time and effort was directed towards placing the young school on a firm financial foundation—a task complicated by the Panic of 1837 and its aftermath. To alleviate the financial problems of the school, Wait periodically solicited contributions in its behalf until his resignation in 1845.30 For all his attention to collegiate duties and his disinclination to discuss the questions agitating the public, Wait never escaped the growing controversy over slavery.

In the 1840's, Northern relatives became even more vocal in their denunciation of the slave system and, by extension, of Wait for continuing to live in its midst. Aware of the growing abolitionist activity in his region of New York by 1841, W. Z. Waite predicted that in the impending local Assembly election the Anti-Slavery vote would be "increased 20 fold from last fall." Mrs. Wait's brother-in-law felt it the Christian's duty to pray for "those whose merchandise is in the bodies and souls of men, and pray that they may be delivered from the judgment." To him, the Abolitionists were the new "propagators of truth" who, like their earlier counterparts, were said to "turn the world upside down." Becoming increasingly outspoken about the immorality of slavery, W. Z. Waite called it the "one dark spot" impeding the progress of Christianity. To look upon it produced in him "an irresist-

27. Wait, Biblical Recorder, May 11, 1854; Wait's cousin wrote him that his mother appeared "to enjoy much gratification in shewing me the pile of letters and memorial of filial affection," W. Z. Waite, November 25, 1844, to Wait. Likewise: be lost or destroyed, all are preserved as precious remembrances of her beloved York, July 30, 1837, to Wait; Proceedings of the Ninth Triennial Meeting of the 10, 1839, to Wait.
28. ibid.; NCBSM, 1835, p. 8; ibid., 1840, p. 5; Minutes of the Raleigh Association, 1841, p. 4.
30. Wait, Guilford County, N.C., September 19, 1839, to Sally Wait; H. Clark, Middletown, Vermont, October 11, 1838, to Wait; ibid., March 8, 1841; Wait, Diary.
able revulsion of feeling.” He applauded the runaways who, he said, exercised “the inalienable rights with which they are endowed by their Creator.” “Thousands in a single year” passed through on their way to Canada, he said, and they thereby presented an incontrovertible commentary on the institution.

The most strident rebuke came from Mrs. Wait’s brother, Isaac Merriam. He expressed his regrets that Wake Forest’s financial problems persisted, but in his opinion “a curse lies upon all benevolent efforts in the South—the blighting paralyzing influence affects them all. Slavery is, ever has been—and will continue to be a leprous curse upon every good thing here.” This “moral incubus,” he charged, rendered “to a great extent the whole circle of benevolent effort inefficient.” His reprimand continued: “I do not say that no good thing can exist there... But while the influence of slavery continues all who labour for these results must feel, must know that there is a deadly mal influence, in Southern institutions which chill their courage and hang like a mill stone upon their efforts, and fatally obstructs them.”

Wait’s only daughter had recently married and Merriam assumed that her husband was a slaveholder. For his part he was “quite sure” that he preferred his children “should earn their whole living by their own efforts than to be connected with this thing that is fraught with every evil.” Realizing that Wait in his adaptation to the South had become a slaveowner, Merriam exhorted him to “take timely measures to show that mercy to those in your power—that you would that they should shew to you were you & they to change situations.” 31

By 1845, national church organizations had begun splitting on sectional lines because of tensions arising over the slavery question. Among Baptists, the issue had been festering for several years, and many a rupture seemed inevitable. Within North Carolina, Editor Thomas Meredith of the Biblical Recorder, the denominational newspaper, disapproved of a division. Yet following the rejection of slaveholding Southerners as missionaries by boards of the General Convention, the Southern Baptists elected to form their own organization. Accordingly, on May 8, 1845, delegates convened in Augusta, Georgia, and organized the Southern Baptist Convention with foreign and home mission boards. Immediately this new body impinged upon Wait’s life through an offer of employment within one of its agencies. A. J. Battle, a North Carolina Baptist minister and long-time associate of Wait.


on his return trip home from the Augusta meeting, informed Wait that he had taken the liberty to recommend him for a vacant position. The person appointed Corresponding Secretary of the Home Missions Board of the Southern Convention had immediately resigned. Battle suggested to Jesse Hartwell of South Carolina, President of the Domestic Mission Board, “that bro Saml. Wait... would make a first rate Corresponding Secretary for our Domestic Board.” Hartwell concurred and promised to broach the matter at the Board meeting. To justify his presumptuousness, Battle offered his knowledge of Wait’s strong feelings on the religious education of Negro slaves. That matter was to be a special concern of the Domestic Board, and Battle told Wait that by accepting the position, he would be able to implement a system that would cause “Ethiopia to stretch forth her hands unto God.” Within two weeks, Wait received a letter from Hartwell inquiring if he would undertake the duties of the secretariat and informing him that acceptance would necessitate his moving to Alabama. 32 Although Wait remained in North Carolina, the fact that the Board offered him the position signified his acceptability to the Southerners despite his Northern antecedents.

The Methodist Episcopal Church also split into Northern and Southern branches. Consequently, W. Z. Waite wrote that “that portion of the Church residing in the free states feel themselves relieved of a heavy burden and will naturally without any efforts settle down on the right ground with regard to slavery.” Never reticent on the issue of the immorality of slavery, he remained an outspoken advocate of abolition. He told his Southern cousin of a forthcoming Anti-Slavery convention of 10,000 persons “to consult on the best means of freeing our country from the curse of slavery.” Because of the influence of Southerners in directing national policy, in 1845, Waite had found “the Political heaven... [presenting] a repulsive aspect” and this attitude was still in evidence a few months later when he commented on Northern opinions of the Mexican War: “It is generally looked upon as a mean and wicked pretence to strengthen the arm of the oppressor and extend the area of slavery.” He felt constrained to inform his cousin, despite the North Carolinian’s probable aversion to “hearing much on the subject of slavery,” that anti-slavery feeling in the North was not to be attributed to “a few weak heads” but was universal. Citizens of the free states had resolved that the system would be allowed no further

growing room. He recognized that the ultimate solution to the problem was fraught with dangerous possibilities, even that “the fair fabric of the Union . . . might be dashed to atoms for the benefits of Slavery.”

The nadir of Wait’s personal conflicts over the slavery problem came in 1848. While visiting the Middletown, Vermont, church where many years before he had received his baptismal ordinance and where he could probably have become minister after Sylvanus Haynes’ death in 1827, Wait felt the depth of hostility that many Vermonter held for slavery and slaveholders. Contrary to an apparent custom of allowing Wait to preach in that church on his return visits to his home, this time the church issued no such invitation. Though the minister offered several transparent excuses for his intention to preach that Sunday himself on a particularly important important topic, Wait correctly analyzed the situation. Despite his brother’s membership in that church and the objections of other close friends, the congregation had voted to bar the pulpit to defenders of slavery.

The experience wounded Wait’s feelings. W. Z. Waite wrote his cousin that though the church members held deep-seated feelings against slavery, their action towards him constituted an unnecessary and improper display of personal disrespect. Personally, he felt that a slaveholder could possess piety in all other respects. He concluded poignantly: “Whether you see fit to answer this communication or not I wish to say that I feel a deep interest in your welfare which neither time nor distance nor circumstance can destroy. You are as welcome to my affections and friendship now and would be as cordially rec’d to my embraces as at any former period of our lives.”

Though the correspondence resumed, Wait had made his last trip to Vermont.

Returning to North Carolina, Wait resumed his involvement in the many aspects of his “duty” there. After his resignation as Wake Forest President, he had been elected President of the school’s Board of Trustees. For six years he held several pastorates in piedmont North Carolina. In later years, Wait called this the happiest part of his life. In 1851, he again turned his attention to education, this time as president of the denomination’s Oxford Female College. His ability to continue his arduous labors despite advancing years amazed his contemporaries. He wrote W. Z. Waite that he needed forty years more to accomplish his plans.

By 1857, Wait had determined to resign his presidency despite requests that he continue. In June of 1857, he had returned to Forestville, near Wake Forest, to live with his daughter and son-in-law. The Oxford presidency was Wait’s last longterm occupation through which he worked to extend evangelical Christianity. But his last years were anything but a period of retirement. Soon after his resignation from Oxford, Wait seriously considered moving to Texas despite his sixty-eight years. He invited W. Z. Waite to meet him there, but the latter declined because he believed he could not acclimate himself to Texas after a lifetime in the North. Moreover, none of his children would think of moving into a slave area. Wait remained in his adopted homeland and devoted his energy primarily to serving as pastor of various churches and working for his beloved Wake Forest until his health restrained him.

Soon Wake Forest and Wait felt the dislocations in Southern life caused by the coming of the civil war. Writing from Illinois, John White, a former President of Wake Forest, expressed to Wait his high regard for an Illinois politician whom he felt to be the man for the country’s need. “It is nearly a settled question in the minds of the people here,” he reported, “that Lincoln under God is to be that great and good spirit that is to calm sectional strife and open a brighter dawn for our disturbed country.” This politician’s advent confirmed White’s belief that “God always selects noble and true men for noble works.”

But Lincoln’s election did not calm sectional strife. Instead, there developed a “sense of approaching trouble, probably of mortal strife, between those who should be friends and brothers,” as W. Z. Waite expressed his fear. Such an atmosphere, he said, had a “tendency to paralyze business of every kind.” Earlier he had written with some disgust of the “hypocrisy and fraud, and treachery and selfishness in all parties. . . . I am sick of their professions and platforms and fear sometimes there is not virtue enough in the country to save it.” As a supporter of Senator Stephen A. Douglas (a native of Brandon, Vermont) and his advocacy of popular sovereignty, W. Z. Waite felt that both sections were contending for a “naked abstraction which

34. B. Waite, Middletown, Vermont, June 26, 1848, to Sally Wait; Mrs. C. C. Merriam, Middletown, ca. 1848, to Mrs. Wait; W. Z. Waite, Granville, New York, March 11, 1849, to Wait.
[would] probably end in a bloody practicality.” As one who had once maintained that abolition was a national issue, he now advocated that both parties eliminate the “negro question” as a national issue and let the legislatures of the territories handle it. If this were done, he believed, there would be no “further trouble about the negroes . . . and [if] then everybody would mind their own business I think the country could be prosperous and happy.”

Having long since elected to follow his “sense of duty” and work among the Southerners, Wait remained in the South during the war. He fought vainly against the closing of Wake Forest when the Confederate Congress conscription order caused a manpower shortage at the school.

After the war, W. Z. Waite wrote his cousin “to try and ascertain whether you are yet among the living, or whether you have passed to the land of the hereafter.” His letter was not written to “speak of the cause or causes of the war or of its Justice or effects,” although he did “bewail the millions that have fallen and hope and pray for the millions that are left.” In 1866, Wait’s mental powers gave way. He died on July 28, 1867, and was buried in Wake Forest.

Before his death, Wait had received from a ministerial colleague a letter of superlative commendation for his life and labor in North Carolina: “Through God’s grace, you have done a world of good in N.C. . . . You were always a working man. . . . If for the last 30 years we had had 50 such men as you, N.C. would have been a garden.”

The State Convention eulogized Wait as “emphatically a good man . . . of natural dignity and deep-toned piety.” Sensitive to the fact that Wait’s adoption of North Carolina had strained his Vermont bonds, the Convention resolution concluded: “Ours during life, he has at last full of years and full of honors, laid his bones among us as amid the family of his choice, leaving to us the precious legacy of his unfailing love and his spotless example: we will enshrine it in our hearts.”

So it was that another son of Vermont saw his duty far from the Green Mountains of his native state.

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