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Wait, Samuel (19 Dec. 2789-28 July 1867), Baptist minister, educator, and college president, was born in White Creek, Washington County, N.Y., the son of Joseph and Martha Wait. During his youth the family moved near Middletown, Vt. A convert of the Second Great Revival, Wait prepared for the ministry and in 1816 accepted a call as minister of the Baptist Church in Sharon, Mass. There he married Sally Merriam of Brandon, Vt.

Believing that he needed additional study, in 1819 he began theological studies with Dr. William Staughton, first in Philadelphia and then at Columbian College (now George Washington University) in Washington, D.C. Due to their limited funds, Mrs. Wait remained in New England until 1822, when Wait was employed as a tutor at Columbian. For reasons that are unclear, he received an M.A. degree from Waterville College, Maine, in 1825. While in Washington, the Waits briefly considered being missionaries to the Orient but were dissuaded by her relatives. Eventually, mismanagement of Columbian's finances by Luther Rice, the school's treasurer and a pioneer Baptist missionary, led indirectly to Wait's subsequent move to North Carolina, which he also considered to be a mission field.

In late 1826, to alleviate Columbian's monetary problems, its trustees sent President Staughton and Wait into the South to solicit funds. While in New Bern Wait preached several times for the Baptists, having been given a letter of introduction to the parish by Thomas Meredith, their former minister, who was also a former student of Staughton's. Later, when Rice reasserted his primacy in the college's affairs, Wait resigned his agency and returned to New Bern for a trial pastorate.

In the autumn of 1827 he moved his family to North Carolina, which he noted was largely bereft of religious enlightenment. For the last forty years of his life he worked to improve the religious and educational conditions in his adopted homeland. In 1830, as one of five college-trained Baptist ministers in the state, Wait was instrumental in founding the Baptist State Convention, an organization espousing the causes of missions and an educated ministry. For three years he was the convention's agent, traversing the state with his family in a covered wagon to solicit financial and organizational support.

In 1833 the Baptist State Convention authorized the establishment of a literary institute largely for the training of ministers. To help reduce tuition the convention endorsed a program of manual labor and purchased a farm in Wake County as the site for the school, called the Wake Forest Institute. Chosen principal, Wait had sole responsibility for the care of over seventy students from the time the school opened in early 1834 and until the following year. To demonstrate his regard for the manual labor plan, he worked in the fields with the students. Even so, the work plan was soon scuttled. In 1839, after the legislature had amended the charter, the school became Wake Forest College, of which Wait served as president until 1845.

Often during his tenure, the school's precarious financial condition caused Wait to spend much time traveling to raise funds, a task complicated by the nation's economic problems and by the general indifference of many Baptists. Following his resignation he immediately became chairman of the board of trustees, and in 1849 Wake Forest awarded him an honorary doctor of divinity degree.

When the Waits moved to North Carolina, their northern relatives frequently criticized them for living in the slave region. Wait maintained that ministers should say nothing about the issue, and Wake Forest owned a few slaves. After the creation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, he declined an overture to accept appointment as secretary of a convention mission board. Instead, he remained in North Carolina as minister in several parishes from 1845 to 1851. He later called this the happiest period of his life. In 1851 he resumed to education as president of Oxford Female College, a post he held until his retirement in 1857. He then moved to Forestville, where he resided for the rest of his life.

Still possessing physical vigor and intellectual clarity, Wait in 1858 evidently considered accepting the presidency of Mississippi Female College in Hernando, Miss. During the Civil War he continued to be active in Baptist association matters as well as chairman of Wake Forest trustees until November 1865. Thereafter he still remained on the board. Such was his devotion to his beloved Wake Forest that even with the onset of mental debility, "he was devising ways and means by which he could promote the interests" of the school.

The Waits had two children: Ann Eliza, who married John Brewer, a Wake County merchant; and William Carey, who died in 1831 as an infant. Wait died in Forestville and was buried in Wake Forest. His portrait hangs in Reynolda Hall at Wake Forest University. A few months before Wait's death, a colleague assessed his impact in North Carolina: "You were always a working man.... Working men are rare.... If for the last 30 years we had had 50 such men as you, N.C. would have been a garden."

W. RONALD WACHS

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Meg Phipps


Courtesy of Wake Forest University

Sally Wait's letters to her husband are among the historical documents from Wake Forest's Samuel Wait Collection that will soon be accessible on the Internet.

The letters were written between 1820 and 1857, when the pair were separated for months, even years, by Samuel Wait's work in North Carolina.



Courtesy of Wake Forest University

Laments come to light

Letters to Wake founder on display

BY MARGARET MOFFETT BANKS
Staff Writer

WINSTON-SALEM — Ever the New Englander, Sally Wait feared the Southern sun would wither her delicate frame.

That might explain the chilly letter she wrote in June 1831 to husband Samuel Wait, when he demanded she move from Vermont to North Carolina.

"I presume you will not think of getting a carriage without a cover to it," Sally Wait told the man who would one day found Wake Forest University. "I am sure I could not ride in one at this season of the year one half day without getting sick."

Her letters to her husband, along with her diary, are among historical documents from Wake's Samuel Wait Collection that soon will be accessible on the Internet. The university's Z. Smith Reynolds Library received a \$23,500 federal grant earlier this year to put the documents online.

Starting July 1, the library's Web site will provide links to hundreds of letters from the collection, including dozens between Samuel and Sally Wait.

The letters were written between 1820 and 1857, when the pair were separated for months — even years — by Samuel's work.

Viewers will see scanned versions of original handwritten letters, alongside easier to read typed versions.

Historians have long studied Samuel Wait, who also was an early leader of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina and the most prominent Baptist minister of his day.

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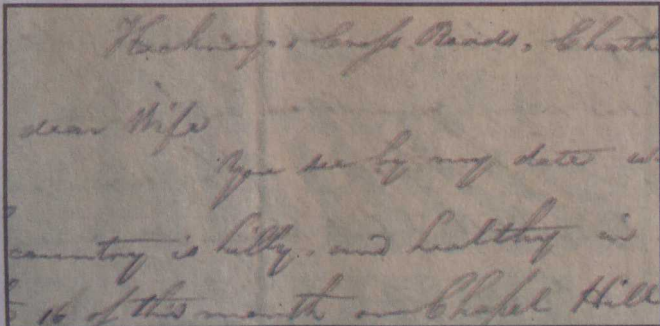
WANT TO VIEW?

The Samuel Wait Collection, including letters Samuel and Sally Wait wrote to each other, will be online beginning July 1 at www.wfu.edu/library/special



PHOTOS BY H. SCOTT HOFFMANN/News & Record

Some of the items preserved include Samuel Wait's walking stick, Sally Wait's journal and letters. A detail of a letter, at left, from Samuel to Sally, describes the landscape and a visit to Chapel Hill. A federal grant has enabled Wake Forest to digitally copy the letters for storage on a computer.



Letters

Continued from page B1

But Sally Wait's role hasn't been discussed in previous research, said Lisa Persinger, special collections librarian.

"I think her letters have been so overlooked," she said.

The correspondence reveals Sally Wait was part drama queen, part put-upon preacher's wife — but no shrinking violet.

Take the letter Sally Wait wrote her husband in 1827, when she was living in White Creek, N.Y., and Samuel was preaching in New Bern. Samuel had been hinting in previous letters that God was leading him to stay in North Carolina — against Sally's wishes.

Sally promised to follow God's will, as long as it was God's will and not merely her husband's.

"Should I be convinced that (God) called us to go to New

Bern I think I should be willing to go," she wrote.

The Sally Wait letters reveal much about the lives of women in the early 1800s, particularly the lonely, isolated life of a preacher's wife. She writes of her bonnet-making business, which helped supplement the family income. And she speaks of their strong-willed daughter, Ann Eliza, lacking her father's guidance.

Sally Wait longed for her husband's return to the North, where she and their two children divided their time living with relatives in Vermont and New York.

"It has been our lot to be 'tossing to and fro' ever since we married. I long for a quiet steady home," she wrote in 1827.

She finally got her wish in 1831, after the death of their 3-year-old son in Vermont. Samuel Wait was notified of young William Carey Wait's death through a letter, but too late to attend the funeral.

Sally grieved without her husband by her side.

In April 1831, Samuel decided he could live apart from his family no longer. But the Baptist convention couldn't find an officer to replace him.

"I begged them to look around and see if someone could not be obtained," he wrote. "Having just received such heavy tidings, my feelings were much of the time so low that I could not think of being a wanderer any longer."

Samuel Wait told his wife to leave Vermont immediately and join him in North Carolina.

"You have sadly disappointed both your friends and mine, I am myself a little disappointed," she responded on May 16, 1831. "When I think of taking so long a journey alone and the difficulties which I must encounter on the way my courage almost fails me."

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