

• BAPTIST HERITAGE •

Sandy Creek, North Carolina: The First Separate Baptist Church in the South

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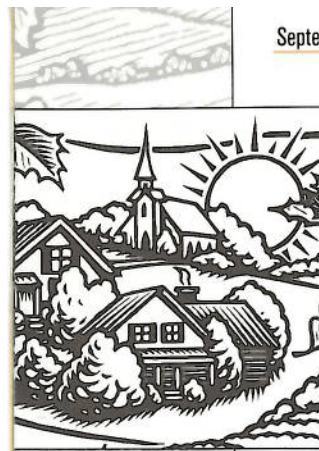
Pioneer Baptist historian Morgan Edwards wrote, “In 1755 a small company from Connecticut came and settled . . . at a place called Sandy-creek. They were 16 souls in number, having Shubal Stearns to be their minister; these were the beginning of what are commonly, tho’ improperly, called ‘Separate-baptists,’ who soon spread thro’ the province, to South Carolina and Georgia, and northward to Virginia. . . .”

Inspired by the Great Awakening, the Separate Baptists of Sandy Creek Baptist Church, in North Carolina, went on from this modest beginning to spread rapidly across the South. Within 17 years, Edwards recorded, the Sandy Creek church became “the mother of all the Separate-baptists” spreading its “branches westward as far as the great river Mississippi; southward [to] Georgia; eastward to the sea and [Chesapeake] bay; and northward to [the Potomac River].” Edwards added that in those 17 years the Sandy Creek church was responsible for planting 42 churches and calling 125 ministers.

Leading this explosive growth were Shubal Stearns, his sister Martha Stearns Marshall and her husband Daniel Marshall. Notable for many characteristics, Separate Baptists were best known for emotional worship, fervent evangelism, and zealous church planting. Often independent frontiersmen, the early Separate Baptists sought complete religious freedom so that they might aggressively evangelize everyone they met. Especially in Virginia, Separate Baptists supported separation of church and state and thus influenced the development of the Bill of Rights. Intensely biblicist, Separate Baptists were suspicious of confessions of faith that might be used to enforce creedal uniformity. Unusually egalitarian, they allowed women to take an active role in the administration of the church and in utilizing their gifts in ministry, including in “exhortation and public praying.” Martha Marshall was one such woman noted for her speaking abilities.

Baptist historian Walter Shurden regards the “Sandy Creek Tradition” and its “Ardor” along with the earlier “Charleston Tradition” of Regular Baptists and its “Order” as the two traditions that “formed the Southern Baptist Convention” and the “blending” of which “helped shape the Southern Baptist synthesis.” Baptist historian Leon McBeth writes, “both traditions have enriched Southern Baptist life and, like two streams merging into one river, currents from each can still be identified and traced. The merging of these traditions brought tensions which continue today; Southern Baptists are still trying to maintain balance between two streams of their heritage. . . .”

Texas Baptists owe a great debt to the Baptists of Sandy Creek who were important in shaping us as we are today.



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