

NELSON BARBOUR THE TIME-ISTS' LAST BREATH

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This article is based on research for the book *Nelson Barbour: The Millennium's Forgotten Prophet* due for publication later this year. Parts of the research included in the book can be found at TruthHistory.blogspot.com.

Nelson H. Barbour (August 23, 1824 - September 1, 1905), a physician, inventor, prospector and Adventist clergyman, was born in Throopsville, New York, and died in Tacoma, Washington. Barbour is best known for his brief association with Charles Taze Russell. The Library of Congress gives his middle name as Homer, but with unknown authority.

Barbour was educated at Temple Hill Academy in Geneseo, New York, attending from 1839 to 1843. He also studied for the Methodist Episcopal ministry under an "Elder Ferris," apparently William H. Ferris. According to his own account as given to a newspaper reporter, he plied Elder Ferris with questions on man's destiny and salvation until Ferris suggested he was better suited to farming.

When he was 19 he was exposed to Millerism either through the preaching of a Mr. Johnson or Henry F. Hill. Barbour and Hill, a Millerite evangelist then closely associated with Joseph Marsh and later an Evangelical Adventist, maintained a friendship throughout their lives.

Barbour advocated Millerite doctrine as an "independent" preacher. He found the disappointments devastating, and returned to his education. He became a physician, practicing as a Medical Electrician, a specialist in nerve and joint disorders. When gold was discovered in Australia, he booked passage and labored in the gold fields. He later claimed to have preached in Australia. This would have been his only opportunity to do so; so it is evident that he did not entirely reject Christianity, even if disappointed in prophetic speculation.

He returned to the United States in 1859. While on board ship he and an unnamed clergyman studied Bible prophecy. Barbour concluded that Christ would return in 1873. He sought verification in the British Library, finding it in E. B. Elliott's *Horae Apocalypticae*. He leaves unnamed other works he may have consulted, but his contemporary, Isaac Wellcome, suggested he was influenced by John Aquila Brown, a British silversmith turned prophetic student.

Barbour never claimed originality for the 1873 date, specifically saying that others had reached the same or similar conclusions before him.

When he returned to the United States in 1860, he studied the subject further in the Astor Library. When he was certain of his conclusions he wrote letters to his former Second Adventist associates, including H. F. Hill. He visited Josiah Litch who rebuffed his speculations.

Barbour remained in New York until about 1864. While there he became an inventor, and he is listed on *Trow's Directory* as such. It appears that he associated with an Adventist congregation that met at Cooper Union (Cooper Institute). Those who would later advocate his views preached there.

Barbour moved to Auburn, New York about 1864, returning to medical practice. He continued to invent, and one of his patents caused a noticeable stir among engineers. By 1865 he returned to New York City. He also found opportunities to preach his speculations about 1873 to associates. Benjamin W. Keith adopted his teachings in 1867. Several contemporary inventors were swayed too.

The Barbourite movement came to serious Adventist notice in 1870, but was not immediately popular because most of the Adventist communities outside the Seventh-Day Adventist Church were already swayed by William C. Thurman's predictions. With Thurman's second failure in 1869, Barbour appears frequently in the Advent Christian press. His movement gained significant numbers, and it fragmented. Several overlapping parties represented the 1873 date. These include Jonas Wendell, preaching independently; Charles C. Barker and S. W. Bishop through *The Watchman's Cry*; and Barbour himself.

Barbour wrote articles and published a small book, *Midnight Cry, Or Evidence for the Coming of the Lord in 1873*. Many associated with the 1873 movement met at Terry's Island to await the second coming and remained there through the fall of 1873. When failure was self-evident Barbour pushed the date back to 1874. He started his own magazine in December 1873, calling it *The Midnight Cry*, later *Midnight Cry and Herald of the Morning*.

Failure to realize predictions in 1874 caused massive defection from the Barbourite movement, and circulation, which had reached 20,000, dropped to a couple thousand. Barbour was ready to quit.

Keith, who had long believed in an at least partially invisible second presence, found support for those views in simple lexicon study, in the rendering of *parousia* in Benjamin Wilson's *Diaglott*, and in Daniel Whedon's commentary. He took his arguments to Barbour, who accepted them. Other associates, notably John H. Paton, also accepted them, though with some reluctance at first.

Mainstream Second Adventists rejected the new views. A running dispute between Barbourites and other Adventist bodies took place in the pages of their

respective papers. By the end of 1875, Barbourites saw themselves as the wise virgins and the rest of the Advent body as deluded or apostate.

Circulation of *The Herald of the Morning* continued to decline, and the magazine was eventually halted in early 1876. About December 1875, a copy fell into the hands of Charles Taze Russell, the pastor of an independent but Adventist leaning congregation in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. He was already familiar with the 1873 date through association with Jonas Wendell and others. He wrote to Barbour, enquiring about Barbour's connections to Adventists and asking for more information. He suggested a book, issued in parts, that would explain the basics. In August 1876, Russell paid Barbour's way to Philadelphia and arranged for him to lecture in St. George Hall. Russell became fully involved in the Barbourite movement afterwards.

He, Barbour and others traveled and preached their partially-invisible presence views and Age-to-Come theology. Barbour and Russell also attended the Alton Bay Conference in 1877, though their reception was less than welcoming.

Barbour's prophetic framework led to an expectation that the saints would be translated to heaven in 1878. Failure led to major difficulties. Russell sought adjustments to their chronological views. Barbour reexamined their basic theology. He rejected atonement through shed blood in favor of a sort of atonement by example. Russell advocated a more traditional view with the element of substitutional atonement. This led to a division in their ranks. Russell and others, many of the most prominent, started their own movement. The division was acrimonious, particularly on the part of Barbour and those remaining with him. Barbour suggested Russell and those with him were the foolish virgins of Jesus parable.

Barbour eventually abandoned invisible presence views and returned to a more standard Adventist stance. He continued to advocate Age-to-Come theology. Barbour made predictions for 1881, 1886 and other dates. With each failure, his already small movement fell into obscurity.

Barbour started a small Adventist congregation in 1873. When he moved to Rochester, New York, the congregation met in the Sibley Block. Later he changed the name to Church of the Strangers, and it found various homes in Rochester, finally settling in a basement chapel in an apartment complex owned by Barbour.

The Church of the Strangers affiliated with the Restitutionists, a group now fallen into some obscurity. Most Restitutionist churches eventually became part of the Church of God General Conference.

Barbour returned to the Alton Bay Conference in 1898. The Advent Christians meeting there tried unsuccessfully to have him thrown off his campground.

Barbour died while on a trip to the West in 1905, missing one last disappointment. His final prediction on the return of Christ was for the year 1907.

After he died, the small Church of the Strangers congregation fragmented into a group with Christadelphian associations and into a smaller group headed by a Leonidas B. King. The group headed by King called itself "The New Philadelphian Society." It seems to have had a very short existence.

Barbour's significance to the Advent Christian Church and Life and Advent Union was to speed along the move away from predictive prophecy. For Jehovah's Witnesses and Bible Student groups, his greatest significance is not a heritage of date setting, but his advocacy of Atonement views common among Unitarians of the era. The controversy forced those associated with Zion's Watch Tower to more closely define their views. It gave Russell experience as a controversialist writer.

Barbour's relationship to the Restitutionists is hard to trace. No conclusions can be reached at this time. It is our feeling that others may have information we have not discovered that bears on the Church of the Strangers and its affiliation with the Restitution Church. Comments and especially helpful information are very much appreciated.