

The Mystery at the Beginning:  
Towards dating the organizing covenant

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The Mystery in the Story

When I was called to be the 46th pastor of the First Baptist Church in Swansea, I was very much encouraged to tell the Swansea Story. First indications were that it was a venerable story, as I was told that this congregation claimed to be the oldest Baptist church in Massachusetts and one of the oldest Baptist congregations in America. These claims would certainly place its origins at the very beginnings of Baptist development in the Americas.

So to tell this story first I had to learn it. Here there were two things operative: first, the congregation encouraged me to pursue the fascinating account of the origins and subsequent establishment of the congregation. This congregation is very proud of its heritage and intuitively knew that the story needed to be told. My predecessor, the Rev. Elizabeth Wilkinson had also been encouraged to delve deep into the records of the congregation and had left a very helpful trove of notes and charts. Second, we discovered that the extant records of the church are virtually intact from 1649 until the present with very few gaps. From the point at which I read the abbreviated history included in the booklet prepared for the congregation's 300th

anniversary I was compulsively intrigued with this narrative of dramatic scope and consequence. Very soon after I arrived, I learned that the original records of the congregation, a book begun in Wales by John Myles the founding pastor, brought with him to the Americas, was available, held in the vaults of the John Hay Library at Brown University. Then as we removed the clutter from the unused rooms in the church's building to make way for Sunday school space, I found even more engaging material. We found a volume entitled *Developments in Baptist History*, a collection of essays and articles written for the congregations 250th anniversary in 1913 and two copies of a volume entitled *The Ilston Book, Earliest Register of the Welsh Baptists*. This volume was the scholarly transcription of the portion of the church's history pertaining to its life in Wales and the account of the Myles record book itself. One other publication surfaced in that serendipitous uncovering: Volume CXXXIX, January 1985 of the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*.

It was in reading the article about our congregation in this periodical that my sense of mystery and intrigue began. The article simply entitled "Swansea, Massachusetts, Baptist Church Records" is both the transcription of and comment on records of the congregation that had been lost from the time of the last entries in 1772 until their reappearance at an antiquarian book sale in Boston in 1982. Particularly vexing was Mr. Anderson's claim, based on the documentary evidence, that this congregation was not organized in 1663 but more likely in 1666 a year later than the First Baptist Church in Boston.

From this pointed start I began reading as much as I could about the Swansea congregation both to gain a comprehensive sense of its life and history but also to determine if our claim could indeed be justified. Among other things I read from histories almost a century old, Henry C. Veader's *A Short History of the Baptists* (1891 and 1907), and *A History of Antipedobaptism* (1896);

Albert H. Newman's *A History of the Baptist Churches in American* (last edition 1915), and Henry Melville King's *John Myles* (1905). Later research led me to Robert Torbet's *A History of the Baptists* and William G. Mcloughlin's works *New England Dissent, 1630-1883: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* and *Soul Liberty*. These formal Baptist histories gave a larger context to such local accounts as are found in the *History of Swansea, Mass. 1667-1917*, Leonard Bliss' 1836 history *History of Rehoboth* and Bowen's 1945 reading of ancient town records *Early Rehoboth*

From these sources I can offer now a brief synopsis of the Swansea story. John Myles, a man, born and raised in Wales, educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, trained ostensibly for the ministry, went in 1649, soon after Charles I was beheaded, to a congregation on Broad Street London, identified as the Glasshouse church, a congregation guided by the leadership of John Spilsbury, William Consett, Edward Draper, and William Kiffin. This congregation was a segment of the first Particular Baptist church in England. There Myles became convinced of Baptist principles. He returned to Wales and founded a nonconforming, antipedobaptist congregation near Ilston. From 1649 until approximately 1662 he worked to found and minister to an additional four congregations of the antipedobaptist persuasion. During this period he held a position with Cromwell's government called a "tryer", an office which supervised the qualifications of those seeking to be recognized ministers. In 1662, a law, the Act of Uniformity, was passed that "compelled every clergyman of every name, on or before August 24th, St. Bartholomew's Day, to assent in toto to the Book of Common Prayer, under penalty of losing his benefice, and compelled every occupant of a benefice to receive a bishop's ordination" . This law would have produced a crisis for Myles and most likely would have prevented him from continuing his practice of ministry in Wales.

Myles appears publicly in the Plymouth colony in the town of Rehoboth, in March of the year 1665/6. Shortly after, he is proposed as an assistant to the minister of the Rehoboth church, Mr. Zachariah Symes by Captain Thomas Willet. The relationship between Myles and the established Puritan church of Rehoboth was tenuous. Next we see that in 1666/7 the Plymouth Court fines Myles, Nicholas Tanner, a Welshman identified as a member of the Ilston congregation, and others for unauthorized religious meetings (presumably Baptist) and ordered to remove their meeting from Rehoboth. Soon Myles, Willet and others are allowed by the leaders of the Plymouth colony to found, in 1667, both a congregation and a town, named Swansea after their home town in Wales.

This congregation has had continuous existence and many adventures since that founding. Its first building along with Myles' "garrison house" was burned as the King Phillip war broke out in 1675. It called Samuel Luther as its second pastor after Myles death in 1683. It was in communication with the other three earliest colonial Baptist congregations (Boston, Providence and Newport). It was embroiled in controversy after Luther returned the congregation to a more antipedobaptist position around 1707 thus spinning off the Congregationalists to form a pedobaptist church in Barrington. It grew and flourished under its third pastor, Ephraim Wheaton (1717-1734) and fired its fourth pastor Samuel Maxwell for, among other concerns, holding Sabbatarian views. After many ups and downs, nearly disappearing in the 1870's and 80's the congregation survived to restore its vitality as a church in the early part of the 20th century. In the 1980's it called its first woman minister, the Rev. Linda Spoolstra, who went on to become the first woman executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts. Today it remains a vital ministry to the people and town of Swansea, a small congregation, a spiritual family open, caring and seeking to live

into the fullness of its rich heritage.

It is from this brief overview that we begin to learn the story and sense its importance. As one of the original Baptist congregations in the Americas, the Swansea church has participated in a stream of development that has its roots deep in the formation of those people known as Baptists, those who have made unique contributions to life in the United States. But the telling of the Swansea story has been somewhat haphazard over the last years of the twentieth century. While histories written before 1900 indicate the importance of this church in Baptist experience, only one author (McLoughlin) has given extensive attention in the last quarter century, to the Swansea story as others highlight the experiences of the Newport, Providence and the Boston churches. But it is my belief that Swansea is as important as any of these, perhaps more so, since we possess a continuity of documentary evidence from which we can determine that the Swansea congregation, rooted in the Baptist experience in England, has taken an important role in the development of the American Baptist identity. Within its first 100 years, the congregation has sent out people to found other Baptist congregations including Bellingham, Mass; Oswego, N.Y.; and the Baptist Church in Warren where both the Warren Association and Brown University were organized. There is some evidence that the first Baptist congregation in Canada was founded by people from Swansea, Massachusetts.

From this we begin to sense that it is important to those of us who cherish the Christian freedoms that Baptists have brought into visibility, to know and learn from the Swansea story. One critical document in our story is the 1663 covenant. It is certainly at the center of our identity and our history as a congregation. In fact, no other single item of written evidence may be more critical to understanding who we are. The claim of 1663 origination, if it may be further substantiated, would enhance its

value in understanding colonial Baptist development. For then this covenant would be held as an original expression of those who participated in a series of critical events through which we have been given our particular Christian identity and useful in providing a critique of our current denominational practices! It is the intention of this paper to so locate it at the radical center of Baptist history in America.

Our covenant is held to be written in 1663 and signed by seven men including John Myles, the founding pastor. The date of this covenant has largely been accepted without question until Anderson and Owens raise the dilemma produced by the extant documentary evidence. It is attested by a 1720 entry in the Ilston Book by members of the church some of whom seem to be descendents of the original signers who included a "true copy" of the covenant. It is attested by Issac Backus, who held the IB while writing his history of the Baptists in New England. The date 1663 has been used by all the histories mentioned above. But we can not now, without some shadow of doubt, fully embrace the date unless we address the questions raised by Anderson in his 1985 article and Owens in his notes to The Ilston Book.

The dates that are known and documented, cited by Owens, are taken from both Welsh church records and the early Rehoboth records. They are as follows: John Myles and his wife Katherine, his son John Myles, Jr. and his wife, Mary. were excommunicated by the Consistory Court of the Archdeaconry of Brecon, parish of St. Davids, May 5, 1664. The same four were signatories on a sale of land October 1 1664, with Myles, Sr. a signatory to the receipt of the purchase money for that land on July 12, 1665. The first mention of Myles in Plymouth Colony is March 23, 1665/6 when he is received as an inhabitant of Rehoboth. On April 18, 1666 Myles was hired to preach at the Newman church, assisting the pastor, Zachariah Syms. On July 2, 1667 the Plymouth Court fines Myles and others for unauthorized religious meetings.

As Owens states: "As to the date of the covenant, its attribution by the IB scribe to the 'first founders of Swanzey may not be altogether conclusive..." But yet, the covenant may be "associated with the irregular services which earned Myles and others the 1667 fine". Here we are again reminded of the importance of this particular document. We can begin to speculate: was this covenant written by Myles and others as they withdrew from the Newman church sometime after 1666? Or is the covenant now simply misdated? Or could it have been a statement by Myles and others of an arrangement that was begun before Myles was publicly exposed as present in the colony, a criminal arrangement that began with the efforts already undertaken, the expression of the intentions of others to establish an antipedobaptist congregation in the Plymouth colony? Herein lies the mystery at the beginning of the history of the First Baptist Church in Swansea. A mystery that can only be resolved when we propose an answer to the challenge that Anderson hurls at us, which Owens reiterates: "Had a Swansea church been founded in 1663, why would the Court wait four years to bring charges against the founders?"

Toward building a Circumstantial Theory of the Case

Let us begin by reviewing some of the early theories about John Myles arrival in Rehoboth. There have been some speculations that might be referred to as the "two trip theory". Owens suggests that the covenant "equates with the moribund cause which Myles and others revived on his arrival in Rehoboth". He then cites his own work in examining an "undocumented tradition that Myles had returned from America for a brief trip to Wales before finally making his home in Rehoboth." . The sequence would then be something like this: Myles leaves England after 1662, arrives in Rehoboth and "organizes" sometime in 1663, a baptist congregation in covenant with those who had previously been involved with Obadiah Holmes' schismatic group. He then

returns with his wife to sell his properties (July 1665). He then returns to Rehoboth and is accepted by the town as an inhabitant (March 23, 1665/6) the date that Anderson acknowledges and which would allow for the Baptist group to form in late 1666 or early 1667. In this scenario only the undocumented return trip is problematic. And this scenario would certainly satisfy the challenging question as to the timing Plymouth court's actions of July 1667.

To put another theory in place and provide another plausible scenario for Myles arrival we must ask some additional questions and take a wider perspective that puts the founding of the Baptist congregation in Swansea in the greater context of Baptist history. This would follow Anderson's suggestion that a scholar more skilled in Baptist history examine the issues. . One obvious question which no author seems to have addressed in any history that I have perused: Why would John Myles come to Rehoboth? In attempting to answer this pertinent question, I believe that we unearth some additional clues to date our decisive document. The follow-up question: is there any reason or possibility that he could have arrived without leaving records of his journey? These two questions begin to form a line of inquiry that will provide a "circumstantial" case for the early organization of the Swansea congregation and the dating of the covenant in 1663. This case will be built on identifying motive, lines of relationship between "persons of interest" and a pattern of events that might yield an intuitive insight.

I wish, at this juncture, to fully admit that there is no further documentary evidence available to us than what has already been cited. But in creating this theory my hope is to stimulate further research and scholarship. My sense is that there are many as yet unrealized resources both within our own documents (none of the American portion of the Ilston Book has yet been transcribed!) and within old letters, family Bibles and other congregation's

early but unexamined documents. I have found that often re-reading some accounts after perusing others, allows for a correlation of data which generates additional insight and reveals new meanings in familiar facts. Thus my efforts to play the amateur detective! With this caveat expressed. I now press on to resolve the mystery at the beginning by establishing as full a picture as possible of what might have transpired that John Myles, Nicholas Tanner and five men from Rehoboth should have written and signed the covenant of the First Baptist Church in Swansea in the year 1663.

First of all we want to turn our attention to "persons of interest." These individuals are those who are primary and secondary actors in the events of our mystery. Each will be identified as to the part that he or she has played, interests in the action taken (the writing of the covenant) and the relationship known between the others. We will attempt to explore the motivational dynamics of each the principal persons. Second, we want to examine the religious climate of the Plymouth colony in the period in question to be able to understand its effect on the behavior of the people involved. Then, we want to suggest the logistics by which the people involved might have been able to accomplish the establishment of the covenant in question. Finally we want to identify a specific time frame which will locate the covenant in the year 1663, this will be the final "theory of the case."

#### Primary "Persons of Interest"

The following list of people are those whose names appear in the old documents (the 1663 covenant, the record of the towns of Rehoboth and Swansea and the church records themselves) as agents of the establishment of the Swansea church and are thus considered to be directly involved.

Obviously we must begin with John Myles. He grew up in Wales, long place of religious controversy, and in 1641 lacking in "conscientious, settled preachers". As we noted above Myles was

educated at Brasenose College, Oxford in anticipation of entering the ministry. He began his ministry about 1645. After Charles I was beheaded in January of 1649, he journeyed with Thomas Proud to Broadstreet in London, to the Glasshouse Church, to be confirmed of his Baptist inclinations. These inclinations moved him toward a position that would determine a religious practice that was closer to their reading of the New Testament. Such a position would hold that only believers were to be baptized, those who could articulate a "regenerated" heart. His relationship to The Glass House congregation was a key factor in the formation of his practice of ministry. That congregation was a segment of the first Particular Baptist Church founded in England. After his consultation with the Particular Baptists in London he returned to Wales and established 5 congregations, the first near Ilston in 1649. He remained in communication with the Baptists on Broad street as long as he was in England. During the Cromwell Protectorate he became a "tryer" or "tester", a governmental office intended to assure a learned and competent clergy. As a minister in England, it seems that he had "received support from the parish revenues" and as such participated in an established, state approved parish system. After the restoration of the Monarchy, Myles, like other Puritan, Separatists, anticipated a religious tolerance which was not to come. Instead both public sentiment and government policy turned to persecution. Certainly by 1662 when the Act of Uniformity was passed, it would have been clear to Myles that he could no longer safely stay in England. Myles is the only colonial Baptist leader to make the transition from ministry in England to leadership in New England. By this description we can assume that because of his long and well documented association with the Glass House congregation, Myles could be described as a Puritan, Separatist, anti-pedobaptist. He was, however, still able to maintain established relationships with the government and so must have had some

considerable political sensibilities. That he was capable of drawing support to himself and effecting the organization of new congregations is obvious. He would have been an obvious candidate for any group wishing to establish a new church.

Next we turn our attention to those who were signers of covenant. Their role as supporters of the effort places them in the center of the mystery. Given the desirability of limiting the scope of this paper we will give attention to but two of the signers: John Butterworth and James Brown.

John Butterworth becomes a person of interest because according to King (who follows the popularly held account), it was in his home that the gathering of the forming Baptist group occurred. It was there, allegedly, with Myles, Nicholas Tanner (the one documented member of the Ilston congregation), James Brown, Eldad Kingsley, Joseph Carpenter and Benjamin Alby covenanted with each other to be a Baptist congregation. His name appears in a 1658 list of those receiving parcels of land in Rehoboth. He might have been the son of Samuel Butterworth one of the original proprietors of the town. By 1668/9 he was prominently a part of the Swansea establishment with his name appearing on the legal documents of the town's founding.

While a primary figure in this mystery, Butterworth's association with the Baptists is again hidden from contemporary view (as are most of the other signers!). If he was a young person in Rehoboth, and in the Newman church during the brief schism of Obadiah Holmes, he might have acquired his Baptist point of view from observation. That he was very much at the center of the organization of the congregation and the town attests to his high level of motivation to be a Baptist. His name appears with Myles' as representing the church on the 1667 formal request to the Plymouth officials for the organization of the town. John Butterworth typifies those who were the original nucleus of the congregation, inclined to the Baptist position, and waiting to

commit to the ministry of one like John Myles, who could sustain such a position in the light of public attention.

The case of James Brown is very much different and his significance is much more accessible through several interesting accounts. James Brown is generally listed first amongst the signers of the covenant. This might indicate the prominent role which he played in the organization of the Baptists and the establishment of the town. There are two significant facts that contribute to his significance. First he was the son of John Brown. James' father was prominent in the political structures. Of this more will be said below. Suffice it to be said, James grew up in a influential home in Rehoboth, his name appearing as early as 1645 on the property lists along with names such as Obadiah Holmes, Samuel Butterworth, Richard Bowen and William Carpenter (all family names that appear later in our history). His entre' into leadership was made very much easier because of his family's prominent position. James followed his father in serving as an assistant governor. By 1666 James was also a "selectman" for the town of Rehoboth along with two others identified later as Baptists. The other major point we must take into consideration was that James was very early involved with those who held Baptist sentiments. It appears from early records that he was involved in some public way in the schismatic congregation of Obadiah Holmes in 1649. Roger Williams had written to John Winthrop, Jr. in February of 1649/50 referencing the elder Brown's apparent "persecution" of his son in regard to the "new baptism" spreading at Seekonk. Though many of Holmes's congregation removed themselves to Newport, James remained to take up the Baptist cause at a later moment, a cause that he could promote because he prepared for it by putting himself in key community positions.

The ability of James Brown to place himself in positions of influence is more understandable by recognizing the long

leadership of his father, John Brown. John was apparently the brother of Peter Browne of Great Burstead, Essex one of the original Pilgrims who had arrived on the Mayflower as "stranger" Identified as a "Stragglng Saint" (one who arrived late by other means of conveyance) in the Pilgrim company, he rose to leadership in the Plymouth colony. In fact, he became a deputy governor in the court of Plymouth serving in the years 1636, 1638-45, 1647-55 Perhaps because he had been influenced by his fellow Pilgrims, those had gone to Holland in 1609 prompted by the persecution against them, he became an outspoken voice for toleration along with other Plymouth leaders such as Myles Standish, Timothy Hatherly and Edmund Freeman John Brown moved to Rehoboth and became one of the original proprietors in 1645. His name appearing on the property lists along with other notables as Samuel Newman James Brown (his son), William Carpenter and Obadiah Holmes. He was chosen as a "townsman" in March of 1645. John was involved with the 1649 schism initiated by Obadiah Holmes (see note 24) and associated with other identifiable Baptists in 1652 when he was involved in "an action of defamation against Mr. Samuel Newman" which he won although he reportedly did not actually take part in the trial. From 1653 on, we see John Brown, along with his son, and others associated later with the founding of Swansea acquiring land there at the head of Narragansett Bay in area known as Sowams which included Papasquash Neck and a salt marsh of "one hundred acres" (later the site of the first meeting house for the Baptists). One key partner in this is Captain Thomas Willet, the other founder of Swansea. Besides his son, James, John had a daughter whose name was Mary. She was married in 1636 to Thomas Willet. John died in Rehoboth in 1662.

There is no more interesting figure in our mystery than Captain Thomas Willet. Understanding his influence and actions are essential in resolving the claims of a covenant drawn in 1663.

While a complete biography is beyond the scope of this paper I will present an overview of his life and the salient points of critical interest . Willet was born and raised in Leyden, Holland, the community from which the Plymouth Pilgrims emigrated. It seems that he arrived in Plymouth about the second Mayflower in 1629. Immediately he became a successful businessman managing the Colony's fur trade in Maine, and later was appointed a captain in the Plymouth militia, succeeding Myles Standish. In the 1640's he became involved in the "triangular trade" a commercial shipping pattern that connected New England, the West Indies and England. Later as he began to amass great wealth, he was successful in trading with the Dutch (because of his facility with the language) and became in 1665 the first English Mayor of New York City. Hall states that after the year 1650

"...Thomas Willett proceeded to prosper in three major realms of activity. While involved increasingly in international conflicts and crises, he expanded his shipping and trading resources to the extent that he was able to conduct operations between most American, West Indies and European ports. Concurrently he continued to serve in government posts. As a public official, he was elected or appointed to a series of high positions, including that of a governor's assistant and magistrate in Plymouth colony, various judicial roles in New Netherland, and ultimately following the English capture of the Dutch colony, the first English mayor of New York city. In company with his government and commercial associates, he took a leading role in acquiring and developing Indian lands, not only in his colony of Plymouth but also in Rhode Island. Within Plymouth colony his land interests followed the tack of his father-in-law John Brown and ultimately led him to the establishment of a town called Swansea. This town, at the backdoor of the colony, received the attention and application of Willets accumulated management, political and religious experience."

Willison identifies Willet as Deputy governor Plymouth in the years 1651-65. And all accounts describe him as a man "interested in the church", a man of faith and piety. His personal relationship to the Brown family indicate affection, trust and a commonality of purpose. His ongoing, cooperative and affectionate relationship with John Myles reveals a genuine collegiality. This is the man given the responsibility to "look out for another godly, able minister" in Rehoboth in November of 1663.

#### Secondary "Persons of Interest"

The "secondary" people are important because they provided indirect support or effect toward the organization of the Baptist congregation in Swansea. They are included in the overview in order to create a more complete picture and to further establish lines of relationship and influence.

Samuel Newman is an important person in our story for several reasons. First he was the one who in 1645 formed the first congregation in Rehoboth. History portrays him as a learned and popular pastor. His pastoral leadership through establishment and controversy attests to his substantial character. It is his death in 1663 that precipitates the opportunity for the Baptists to attempt to implement changes in the Congregational church. At first replaced by Zachariah Symes, it seems that there was still some feeling that the church needed additional leadership. (see endnote 39)

Obadiah Holmes is a figure that casts a shadow across the events of 1663 onward even though he had left Rehoboth in 1651. Baylies early History of Plymouth Colony makes reference to the general conditions that might have predisposed the people of the town to be in conflict with the established clergy. The personal history of this pioneer of the Baptist cause, the content of the controversy and Holmes' subsequent misadventure in Lynn which led to his arrest and whipping, are reported by other scholars.

For the purposes of this paper it is important for us to know that he was the at the center of Baptist sentiment and influenced the thinking of many of those like James Brown and John Butterworth who later became a part of the Swansea effort. We know that there was not only communication but an "intimate" relationship between the Swansea congregation and the Newport congregation which continued into the beginning of the next century. The other relationship which Holmes kept that is important to us is the one with the Baptists in England.

The last character, or perhaps characters, we want to identify in the list of peripheral persons is William Kiffin. He was, along with William Consett and Edward Draper, a leader in Glasshouse church, London. It seems these men were successors to John Spilsbury in the Baptist effort and in communication with both Myles and Holmes. Consett's and Kiffin's names appear in several of the letters transcribed in the Ilston Book which provide insight into the frequency and content of the communications between the congregations in Wales and the Baptists in London. Owens says of this congregation "This was the most active of contemporary Baptist churches in London... 'no other church in London took anything like such a part as did this Glass House church'..." Because of this congregation's vital role in maintaining correspondence between points of Baptist effort both in England and in New England, its leaders were centrally positioned to play a significant role in the development of Baptist churches between 1638 and its demise about 1689.

#### The New England Climate for Baptists

It is important for us to note at this point that Baptists as we know them in the 21st century did not spring fully formed into being at some precise, knowable moment in the 17th century. Each "flavor" of Baptist came from a variety of places, moments and experiences. As McLoughlin suggests "...the Baptists did not know at first who they were or what they stood for..." Those who we

have now identified as Baptists emerged in response to many issues out of the often hostile religious climate in which they found themselves and only later cohered to each other in identifiable clumps. The climate in New England that existed for those developing toward being Baptists could be scarcely be characterized as "nurturing":

"Knowledge of intolerance in Massachusetts prevented any mass exodus of Baptists to the Puritan colonies even after the Clarendon Code led to their persecution in England. Only one leading Baptist minister, John Myles of Wales, ever came to New England to provide the leadership sorely needed for the movement there. And he settled in the Plymouth colony in 1663." McLoughlin goes on to say that because of the intolerance aimed at those non-conforming believers and the rapid response to arrest and punish them by the ecclesiastical and civil authorities "There is no record of many forerunners of the Baptist movement because they feared to reveal themselves." Willison tells us that from 1657 on there were specific laws against those who held or practiced Baptist beliefs. This climate of fear prompted the "cloak of mystery" that now hangs between the modern researcher and the emerging Baptists in the colonial period. "Throughout the colonial period Baptists were the pariah's of New England Society...As a result Baptists pursued such a sub rosa existence that it is still difficult to discern their activities." The twin circumstances of the developing qualities of "Baptist" in the years upon which we focus and the hiddenness of their emerging faith and practice should disallow any surprise that John Myles arrived in Rehoboth mysteriously.

#### A Theory of the Case

Finally I want to pull together from all of these seemingly incongruent data, a theory of the case that would pose a plausible resolution to the mystery at our beginning, the manner and means of John Myles arrival in Rehoboth and the dating of our Covenant

in the year 1663.

Since the mystery focuses particularly on the date of the covenant let me suggest the following scenario by which we could place its writing, and thus the organization of the First Baptist Church in Swansea in 1663:

The lines of influence originate from various places years before their final confluence in Rehoboth that leads to the establishment of the Baptist church and town of Swansea. The first dynamic is the spirit of tolerance and religious reformation that was born in John Robinson's congregation at Gainsborough on Trent. This spirit was nourished in exile in Holland and came to Plymouth colony in the persons of John Brown and Thomas Willet who gave it expression in their family connections. The second line of influence was the Particular Baptists, in their struggle to own a regenerate and visible church membership. This line emerged from the Jacob church (also influenced by Robinson!). It was the Jacob church which evolved to be the Glass House church, the congregation that confirmed Myles as a Baptist. In Plymouth colony, particularly in the frontier town of Rehoboth, the Baptists had found a niche in which to plant seeds and grow. First in the schismatic congregation of Obadaiah Holmes and then in those who remained within Newman's Congregational church, one of whom was James Brown. There was a personal connection between the Brown family, advocates of tolerance, and one of the most popular and powerful of colony leaders: Thomas Willet married to Mary Brown in 1636. That John Brown and Willet were like-minded and cooperative is obvious from the records of Plymouth colony, the Town of Rehoboth and the town of Swansea. Brown and Willet seemed to be purchasing property in the interest of founding a town, perhaps a town in which that dream of toleration could be more fully realized. This could provide a clue to the motivation to bring a more tolerant minister to serve such a town. And in 1662, soon after the death of John Brown,

Willet purchased the rest of the Sowams tract "to prevent both present and future troubles"

Myles, a learned man, well educated and experienced in forming congregations, needed to leave England sometime in 1662 after the Act of Uniformity was enacted. Where could he go? Because of his ties to the Glass House church (and their communications with the Newport congregation) it is possible that he knew of Obadiah Holmes' attempt to form a Baptist church and was either aware of, or even familiar with those who were still sympathetic to such a cause. In the sub rosa world of 17th century Baptists, arrangements could have been made with someone who would be sympathetic to the Baptist cause and provide passage between England and Massachusetts. Such a man was Thomas Willet.

Thomas Willet, both pious and politically powerful, was given authorization, in the same meeting that the Newman church hired Zechariah Symes, "to look out for another godly, able minister to labour with him in the work of the ministry...as to embrace any opportunity that Providence shall guide him to for that end." The date of this meeting: November 25, 1663 The opportunity toward which Providence might guide was the opportunity to bring a minister of the Baptist persuasion to Rehoboth, an opportunity which James Brown, John Butterworth and the others might not only encourage, but in which they might participate! This would be the moment for organization. If Willet and Myles had been in touch through the Newport and/or James Brown connection, made as Myles was in need of fleeing England, it is possible that Myles was already in New England. The days, soon after November 1663 meeting, then would be the time of the writing of the covenant!

My theory is that Thomas Willet provided the undocumented means and opportunity to bring John Myles to the Plymouth colony. He was alerted, by the remnants of the schismatic group, to the fact that a Baptist minister needed to remove from Wales

sometime in 1662. Myles would have been then available in 1663 to author the covenant and gather a seminal group of "proto-baptists" about him. Willet could have even provided subsequent transportation for Myles to close his affairs in Wales and return to New England if the "two trip" theory has merit!

Myles was a minister who was willing to take positions of compromise, to serve an "open communion" congregation and ultimately willing to baptise both children or adults. He was a candidate who was as well educated as Newman had been and politically savvy through his involvement with Cromwell's organization. Given their political position and social standing, the support of James Brown and Thomas Willet for Myles, might even have led to Myles being "settled" as the minister of the Congregational church. But ultimately the records indicate such an effort proved unsuccessful.

But in the time between the covenanting allegedly held at John Butterworth's home and the time when the Baptist group became public, the theory must include a sub rosa existence for the Baptists. This would be necessary to protect them from immediate persecution and to allow Willet and Brown to proceed with the process by which Myles could have become the settled pastor at Rehoboth. When this outcome became increasingly in doubt, the Baptists began their more open meetings which resulted in the Plymouth court's fine and order for them to remove further into the wilderness. Here we must finally answer Anderson's challenging question about the delay in the official rebuke. The answer is obvious from a political, if not religious, point of view: Thomas Willet was an Assistant Governor from 1651 until 1665. James Brown was an Assistant Governor in the years 1665 and 1666. The court would, of course, be reluctant to act against those of long standing prominence, who had so recently been a part of the government of the colony. That they chose to respond in such a tolerant fashion, asking the Baptists

to remove themselves to an area which had already been purchased and set up to be a town by the highly esteemed leaders, seems an entirely appropriate response.

#### Concluding thoughts

If this theory holds( that Thomas Willet provided conveyance for John Myles to come to Rehoboth in 1662 or 1663), supported by evidence yet to be found, it would further substantiate the value of the First Baptist Church in Swansea's 1663 covenant as an important expression of the movement to religious toleration in the America's. The document would be seen as a consequence of the cooperation between religious motivation and political means. It would then be a document to help contemporary Baptists form a new and potent critique of their current practices. It could then be an influential expression of the witness of colonial American Baptists that emerged with new appreciation in value from the mystery at the beginning.

#### End Notes

Robert C. Anderson, "Swansea Massachusetts, Baptist Church Records" in *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, (Vol 139, January 1985), 21

Anderson, 24. Though this conclusion was noted and discussed by the members of our congregation, the FBC in Boston and leaders of the American Baptist Churches in Massachusetts (TABCOM) sometime subsequent to the publication of the article there has been no move to disallow our claim as oldest Baptist congregation in Massachusetts. I have been so far unable to identify the participants or logic in that discussion.

Henry M. King, *John Myles* (Providence: Preston & Rounds, 1905)  
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B.G. Owens, editor, *The Ilston Book Earliest Register of the Welsh Baptists* (Aberystwith, The National Library of Wales:

1996) lviii

Owens, n. 54, xcvi

ibid.

op cit, n. 54, xcix

ibid.

Anderson, 23. He suggests that someone skilled in Baptist history examine the "rich trove of data" brought to light in the rediscovery of the ancient records. This certainly gives motivation and direction to our inquiry!

Albert H. Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1915) 163

The content of Myles Baptist inclinations are often hidden from sight. But the Baptist Confession of 1644, to which the Glasshouse congregation was a signatory, provides a full description of what he may assume he came to believe and practice. The centrality of regeneration as a continuing theme is demonstrated in the Swansea (Mass) records dated 5th day of the 6th month 1669 (Anderson, 30).

Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1965) 42-43

There are numerous letters between the Welsh churches and the Glasshouse congregation published in IB

Newman, 165-166

Torbet, 50-51

William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty, the Baptist's Struggle in New England, 1630-1833* (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1991) 17

King, 26

Leonard Bliss, Jr. *A history of Rehoboth* (Boston: Otis, Broaders, & Co., 1836) 49

Richard L. Bown, *Early Rehoboth* (Concord: The Rumford Press, 1945) 37

Otis Olney Wright, *History of Swansea, Massachusetts 1667-1917* (Swansea: published by the town, 1917) 48

Bliss, 30-31

George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945) 456

Bowen, 33

op cit, 29

Willison, 440 This sibling connection seems to have some doubters. An earlier historian, Otis Wright says John was not Peter's brother. (Wright, 198)

op cit, 452

op cit, 456

op cit, 362

Bliss, 32

Bowen, 29-30

op cit, 30

Willison, 452

Bowen, 32

John Raymond Hall, *In a Place Called Swansea* (Baltimore: The Gateway Press, 1987) and Willison (451) I attempt here to offer a synopsis that serve the intentions of this paper. Willet's adventures and accomplishments could inspire many novels and movies!

Op cit., 10

Op cit, 15

Willison, 456

Wright, 197

Bliss, 59 This is the key reference in the dating of the Swansea covenant in 1663. It demonstrates that Willet was authorized to proceed in finding an assistant for Mr. Symes and creates the opportunity for the Baptists to chose someone of their liking.

Willison, 358

Bliss, 46

Edwin S. Gaustad, *Baptist Piety, The Last Will and Testimony of Obadiah Holmes* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1994) Gaustad provides a comprehensive picture of Holmes and his movement toward being a Baptist.

We claim this from the unpublished notes of Elizabeth Wilkinson, my predecessor, who indicates from her reading of the Massachusetts portion of the IB that letters were sent back and forth between Swansea and Newport during the ministry of Samuel Luther and Ephraim Wheaton. Gaustad indicate (157, n. 4) that there was contact between the Swansea congregation and the Newport Baptists in 1680. Newman (113) states about the Newport church "A correspondence with the Particular Baptists of England was kept up, and the relations of the church with the Swansea and Boston churches were most intimate."

Owens, 32ff. There are many letters contained in these old records which may yet yield insight into the life and practices of the first Baptists.

Op cit, n. 48, xcvi

McLoughlin, 14

Op cit, 17

Op cit, 21

Willison, 377

McLoughlin, 27

Hall's biography of Thomas Willet strongly suggests that this is the case!

Bowen, 32

Bliss, 59