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The Early Baptist Career of Sidney Rigdon in Warren, Ohio

Hans Rollmann

Undoubtedly one of the most enigmatic characters of early Disciple of Christ and Mormon history is Sidney Rigdon (1793–1876). He was onetime adviser and right-hand man to Joseph Smith; he lost out against Brigham Young in the succession crisis of 1844; and, after founding an obscure sect, he died forgotten in Friendship, New York. The recent interest in Mormon beginnings has once again brought into focus the leading personalities and events of the Northeast and Midwest, and some effort has been expended to elucidate the historical significance of this early Disciple-turned-Mormon pioneer of Ohio. In the following pages I do not attempt to reinterpret this religious *enfant terrible* but present new biographical information on the Disciple Rigdon, information hitherto unavailable to his biographers.¹ The new data, contained in the church record of the Baptist church in Warren, Ohio, cover his stay as a licensed—and later as an ordained—Baptist minister in Warren from 4 March 1820

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¹Historians of both religious groups have until now devoted little concentrated scholarly effort to the Disciple–Mormon encounter on the Western Reserve. The Disciple contribution is negligible. Only the following unpublished studies have come to my attention: Joseph Welles White, “The Influence of Sidney Rigdon upon the Theology of Mormonism” (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1947); Leslie Howard Payne, “A Comparative Study of Mormon and Disciple Histories” (M.A. thesis, Butler University, Indianapolis, 1960), with a good historical sketch on pp. 108–25; Agnes M. Smith, “Mormonism on the Western Reserve (1830–1840)” (Seminar paper, Western Reserve University, 1960, located at Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville—hereafter cited as DCHS); Thomas Lee Scott, “Apostasy on the Western Reserve: Selected Disciples of Christ Experiences in the 1830’s” (Paper delivered at Phillips University, Enid, Okla., 1978, DCHS), sketchy, neglects sources.

An examination of local Disciple histories from the Western Reserve deposited at DCHS was disappointing in its lack of information regarding the early Disciple–Mormon interaction. The church histories of Austintown, Painesville, Mantua, Newton Falls, (New) Lisbon, Hiram, and Elyria rely mainly on Amos Sutton Hayden’s *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1875). An exception to this rule is the recently published *Mentor Christian Church Sesquicentennial Scrapbook* (Mentor, Ohio: n.p., 1978) with valuable information on the early Disciple–Mormon encounter. Important, not for its sources but for its mature analysis, is the unpublished paper of Harold E. Davis, “Early Religion in Hiram” (Hiram, Ohio, 1939, DCHS). For histories of the Pittsburgh churches, see footnote 10.

to 5 January 1822.² On the basis of this information, more light can be shed upon the early career of Sidney Rigdon.

The first biographical sketch of Sidney Rigdon—ostensibly based on information provided by Elder Rigdon himself—appeared in 1843 in a series of articles entitled the “History of Joseph Smith” in the *Times and Seasons*.³ Here it is stated that after receiving his preaching license from the Regular Baptists in Pennsylvania in 1819, Sidney Rigdon moved to Trumbull County, Ohio, in May of 1819. He took up residence there in July with Adamson Bentley, an ordained Baptist minister, who with Sidney Rigdon became influential in the Baptist reform movement under the leadership of Alexander Campbell. In Warren, he met Phebe Brooks, formerly of Bridgetown, Cumberland County, New Jersey, whom he married on 12 June 1820. He preached in the district until November 1821, leaving Warren in February 1822 to take charge of the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh. These are the lean data in the *Times and Seasons* regarding Sidney Rigdon’s first ministerial occupation.

In 1899 in a series on “The Life and Labors of Sidney Rigdon” in the *Improvement Era*,⁴ Assistant Church Historian John Jacques follows the account of the *Times and Seasons* exactly without providing additional historical information on the Warren period. So also do all subsequent historians with the exception of Rigdon’s son John Wycliffe, who lectured in the 1890s at Alfred University in upstate New York on the life of his father.⁵ The lecture notes were

²Later, when the Baptist reformers under the leadership of Alexander Campbell separated from the Baptists proper, the church was called “Warren Central Christian Church.” A microfilm copy of the church record is located at DCHS and is quoted here with permission of the Society.

³*Times and Seasons* 4 (1 May 1843): 177–78.

⁴The early period is treated in the *Improvement Era* 3 (December 1899): 97–109.

⁵There is also a brief biographical sketch on Sidney Rigdon in *The History of Friendship* (Friendship, N. Y.: Friendship Sesquicentennial Corporation, 1965), pp. 53–54, which reports some interesting—yet legendary—details regarding Rigdon and his relatives in Friendship, hitherto not made available to a larger reading audience. (This history was edited by Arlene Hess, a friend of Josephine [Jessie] Rigdon, the last surviving grandchild of Sidney Rigdon.) According to *The History of Friendship*:

One of his (Rigdon’s) sons-in-law, George Robinson was the founder and first president of the First National Bank. Many stories were told about Robinson and his fear of someone or something. He was supposed to have had a bullet proof room in the bank and his house on the corner of Main and East Water Street—the Hatch house—has bars on the lower windows. There have been stories that Mr. Robinson might have bettered his financial state with the aid of purloined Mormon money and feared reprisal.

After Rigdon’s death representatives of the Mormons requested a grandson, Edward Hatch, permission to inspect papers left by Rigdon for a clue to a secret which he had said he might reveal but never did. The request was refused. Some believe that Rigdon had intended to reveal his connection with the Spaulding book. A son, John Rigdon, was asked by Mormon officials to come to Salt Lake City and write an account of his father’s connection with the Mormon religion. There is no record that he did so.

Sidney Rigdon was one of the charter members of the local Masonic Lodge.

published in 1966 by Karl Keller in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.⁶

In addition to the information provided in the *Times and Seasons*, John Wycliffe Rigdon states in this short life sketch that the Baptist minister under whom Sidney Rigdon studied “theology” in Pennsylvania belonged to the Regular Baptists. He does not elaborate on his father’s stay in Warren but summarizes: “After getting his license to preach, he went to Pittsburgh and preached a short time there and then went to the town of Warren, Trumbull County, in Ohio, and remained there about two years.”⁷ Of significance here is the report of a short preaching engagement in Pittsburgh after leaving his home church in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, and prior to his stay in Warren. This intervening period, not mentioned by any of his biographers, fits well the church record of the Baptist church in Warren, which dates Sidney Rigdon’s arrival in Warren on 4 March 1820 and not, as the *Times and Seasons* and all subsequent historians do, in May of 1819. The entry of 4 March 1820 reads: “Bro. Sidney Rigdon presented his letter of dismissal from the Church of Christ called Providence Pa. dated Augt 4th 1819 and Bro. Jacob Smith presented his letter also from the Church of Christ called 3rd Baptist Church of Christ in Middleborough Mass.^{tts} and were both cheerfully received, into full fellowship.”⁸ Sidney Rigdon, being a licensed minister, may have served for a short time in Pittsburgh under the tutelage of John Davis, Obadiah Newcomb’s successor to the pastorate.⁹ John Wycliffe Rigdon does not mention for which Baptist church Sidney Rigdon preached, but it was most likely the future First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh, the only Regular Baptist church in Pittsburgh proper. If it were the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh, the invitation he received in 1822 to become its full-time minister may be understood better historically on the basis of this previous

⁶Karl Keller, ed., “‘I Never Knew a Time When I Did Not Know Joseph Smith’: A Son’s Record of the Life and Testimony of Sidney Rigdon,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Winter 1966): 15–42. The lecture notes of the original lecture are owned by members of the Rigdon family, with a copy located in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. A further copy is located in the Washington State Historical Society. A larger unpublished “Life” by John Wycliffe Rigdon, deposited in the Church Historian’s Office in Salt Lake City, provides no additional information on the Warren period.

⁷John Wycliffe Rigdon, Lecture Notes, p. 6; Keller, ed., “A Son’s Record of Sidney Rigdon,” p. 20.

⁸Church Record, Warren Central Christian Church, p. 69. It seems that A. S. Hayden, when writing his *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio*, had this record available. For he writes on p. 92: “March 4th [1820], following, Sidney Rigdon was received into membership, and licensed April 1st, to preach.”

⁹O. Newcomb became minister in 1818 and John Davis in 1820 (cf. Joel van Meter Stratton, *History of the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh, Pa.* [Pittsburgh: n.p., 1910], p. 8; see also *Redstone Baptist Association Minutes* [1818], p. 3, and [1819], p. 3).

acquaintance with the congregation.¹⁰ Besides the common associational affiliation of this church with Rigdon's former church (Peter's Creek), David Philips, the preacher under whom Sidney was said to have begun studying for the ministry, was co-organizer of the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh.¹¹

The reason for the discrepancy in dates will perhaps always remain unknown. Granted that the biographical article on Sidney

¹⁰At the time, there were three "Baptist" congregations in the city. Sidney Rigdon's future congregation had been formed in 1812 by the Rev. Edward Jones and six Regular Baptist families from New England. As the church became affiliated with the Redstone Baptist Association, Alexander Campbell—whose Brush Run church held the same associational membership—preached there occasionally. An independent group holding Haldane Restitutionist convictions was led by Walter Scott, who had taken the church over from his mentor George Forrester after Forrester had drowned in the Allegheny River in 1820. Since A. Campbell's acquaintance with Walter Scott in the winter of 1821–1822, the two churches exhibited fraternal relations but remained independent. Whether the churches formally united in 1824 is doubtful and cannot be firmly documented. For the history of Baptist origins in Pittsburgh see esp. James A. Trewolla, "A History of the Disciples of Christ in Pittsburgh" (B.S.T. thesis, Western Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, 1934), pp. 7–45. See also Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (1897; reprint ed., Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1956), 2: 99; cf. also 2: 42–48, and Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples*, p. 64, where, contrary to Richardson's Campbell biography (vol. 2, p. 47), the church for which Sidney Rigdon preached is described as small in size. Cf. also Stratton, *First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh*, p. 9. Dwight E. Stevenson's assumption that Sidney Rigdon did not meet Walter Scott until March of 1828 in Warren is clearly mistaken (see Dwight E. Stevenson, *Walter Scott, Voice of the Golden Oracle: A Biography* [St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1946], p. 91). See also Henry K. Shaw, *Buckeye Disciples: A History of the Disciples of Christ in Ohio* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1952), p. 44.

From 1815 to 1817 there existed in Pittsburgh also a small congregation under the leadership of Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell's father, who had moved to the city from Cambridge, Ohio, in the fall of 1815 in order to establish a private school. When he applied for association membership for his church in the Redstone Baptist Association in 1816, he was refused membership on doctrinal grounds. After Thomas Campbell's removal from Pittsburgh in the spring of 1817, one of his church members, the young Samuel Church, provided leadership for the congregation. In 1817 it merged with yet another congregationally autonomous group, of Haldane persuasion, under the leadership of John Tassey. Samuel Church and John Tassey now presided jointly over the amalgamated congregation. (See Trewolla's "A History of the Disciples of Christ in Pittsburgh," pp. 7–45 and the helpful map on p. 89. See also Archibald Campbell's sketch in Alexander Campbell's *Memoirs of Elder Thomas Campbell: Together with a Brief Memoir of Mrs. Jane Campbell* [Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth, 1861], pp. 123–25.) The two modern biographies of Thomas Campbell shed no new light on the existence or fate of his Pittsburgh church (see William Herbert Hanna, *Thomas Campbell: Seceder and Christian Union Advocate* [Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1935], pp. 1939–40, and Lester McAllister, *Thomas Campbell: Man of the Book* [St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1954], pp. 174–80).

This is not the place to deal with the Pittsburgh church situation in detail. However, since the literature is little known, the following is a list of Disciple and Baptist literature on the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh:

Disciple Literature:

Trewolla, "The History of the Christian Churches in the Pittsburgh Area"; Ray Emerson Stahl, "A History of the Central Christian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania" (B.D. thesis, School of Religion, Butler University, Indianapolis, 1943); John A. Jayne, "Pittsburgh and the Disciples," *Christian Evangelist* 23 (1909): 1208; A. Chatley, "Early Reminiscences of the Christian Church in Pittsburgh," *Christian Standard* (16 October 1909), pp. 1812–15; "Some Noted Pittsburgh Pioneers," *Christian Standard* (16 October 1909), pp. 1815–16; W. H. Graham, "A Brief History of the First Christian Church Pittsburgh, P.A. (Formerly Allegheny)" (Paper, 1915, located DCHS); "Rededication Services: First Christian Church [of Pittsburgh], Sept. 26, 1943" (Newsletter, DCHS); Percy A. Davis, "Pittsburgh Church History" (Paper read before the Western Pennsylvania Christian Ministers Association, 12 February 1951, located at DCHS); "Brief History: First Christian Church," *The Service of Dedication April 5, 1964: The First Christian Church of Pittsburgh*, DCHS.

Baptist Literature:

J. G. Lauderbaugh, *The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Fourth Avenue Baptist Church* (Pittsburgh: n.p., 1887); Joel van Meter Stratton, *History of the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh, Pa.; Centenary of Organized Baptist Work in and about Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1812–1912)* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Baptist Association, 1913); *The First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: n.p., 1925); William Russell Pankey, *History of the Churches of the Pittsburgh Baptist Association* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1939).

¹¹Lauderbaugh, *Fourth Avenue Baptist Church*, p. 4.

Rigdon in the *Times and Seasons*, upon which all subsequent historians have relied, was written on the basis of information provided by Elder Rigdon himself, the discrepancies might be due to an oversight on his own part. The question then arises, however, as to why the son, writing nearly fifty years later, was so accurately informed about the Baptist period of his father.

The interim ministerial service of Sidney Rigdon in Pittsburgh may have been omitted purposefully in the *Times and Seasons* article of 1843 in order to avoid playing into the hands of those who had advanced the Spaulding theory on the origin of the Book of Mormon. The theory, advanced by Dr. Philastus Hurlbut and Eber D. Howe, considered Sidney Rigdon responsible for acquainting Joseph Smith with the native American romance of Solomon Spaulding, the alleged source for the Book of Mormon.¹² Rigdon's late arrival in Pittsburgh—in 1822 instead of 1819—features prominently in the apologetics against the Spaulding theory.¹³ John Wycliffe Rigdon's lecture, apparently based upon reminiscences of his father, and the

¹²For a critical discussion of the theory, see the appendices in Isaac Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1902), pp. 369–95, and Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), pp. 419–33.

The recent attempt by Wayne L. Cowdrey, Howard A. David, and Donald R. Scales (*Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon?* [Santa Anna: Vision House, 1977]) to prove once again the Rigdon–Spaulding connection is even to the independent historian entirely unsatisfactory. Excluding from this observation the first two self-contained appendices (“Book of Abraham,” pp. 190–96, and “Joseph Smith, Peepstone Gazer,” pp. 197–99), the “startling new discovery” relies on probability judgments regarding the identity of handwriting in an unidentified portion of the autograph version of The Book of Mormon and that of Spaulding's handwriting in topically unrelated specimens located at Oberlin College, Ohio. The thesis assuming two different works by Spaulding—that of *Manuscript Story*, acquired in 1885 by James H. Fairchild, president of Oberlin College, and *Manuscript Found*—is legitimated by the same contradictory and historically distant “testimonies” rejected by Riley and Brodie earlier. The literary impossibility of the Dartmouth graduate Spaulding's having written *Manuscript Story* does not need to be repeated in light of Riley's researches, researches entirely neglected by the authors of the recent expose. Also, the cloud of witnesses mustered in support of the Rigdon–Spaulding connection consists of sources collected at the height of anti-Mormon feelings in the second half of the nineteenth century and finds no corroboration from earlier testimony. On account of its sensational character and the lack of the most basic scientific conventions, the alleged expose hardly deserves scholarly attention. A book dealing primarily with Sidney Rigdon which does not refer a single time to the only two scholarly biographies available—those of Daryl Chase and F. Mark McKiernan—loses its scientific credibility.

The section pertaining to our topic of investigation, Rigdon's earlier career (pp. 92–94), reveals a similar neglect of primary and secondary literature. As we shall demonstrate, Sidney Rigdon was not ordained “during 1818 or 1819” as the authors claim, but between April and August of 1820. That after his dismissal in 1823 as minister of the First Baptist Church in Pittsburgh he “moved . . . [from] the Baptists to the Disciples (Campbellites)” is an incorrect assessment of the situation. Until the dissolution of the Mahoning Association in 1830, the Disciples were not a sociologically or theologically sharply profiled group. The reform views of Alexander Campbell were held by Adamson Bentley and Sidney Rigdon at least since their meeting with Campbell in 1821. Besides Bentley and Rigdon, most ministers of the Mahoning Association entertained these reform views without severing ties with the larger Baptist body until 1830. Rigdon's dismissal from Pittsburgh was not an event unrelated to the reform cause but was initiated by the opponents of Campbell in the more conservative Redstone Baptist Association, to which Rigdon's Pittsburgh church belonged.

¹³Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism*, p. 382; see especially *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1967), 1: 141; Mark McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer, 1793–1876* (Lawrence, Kans.: Coronado Press, 1971), p. 38; and Daryl Chase, “Sidney Rigdon: Early Mormon” (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1931), p. 54.

conclusions drawn from the church record in Warren, locate him in Pittsburgh in 1819, three years earlier than the anti-Spaulding writers suggest. If we assume that in order to facilitate the interim charge even previous association of Sidney with Pittsburgh is likely, especially in light of the geographical proximity of Peter's Creek to Pittsburgh, the common Redstone associational affiliation of the church with the Pittsburgh church, as well as the personal contact of Peter's Creek pastor David Philips with the Pittsburgh church, it may have been historically possible—but unlikely—that Sidney Rigdon met Solomon Spaulding (who died in 1816) or the printer in whose office Sidney was said to have read the manuscript. However, the time frame still does not establish any link with Joseph Smith, the necessary basis for the Spaulding theory. Also, the Jacob Smith of Middleborough, Massachusetts, who, according to the church record, was jointly received into membership of the Warren church with Sidney Rigdon, is unrelated to Joseph Smith. The new data advanced in the preceding pages in no way support the Spaulding theory; they do provide, however, a possible motive for Rigdon's deletion in the *Times and Seasons* biography of reference to his first Pittsburgh stay. That such deletions for polemical purposes are not uncommon is attested throughout the history of religions in general and of Christianity in particular.

However, our knowledge of Sidney Rigdon's assumed brief stay in Pittsburgh rests chiefly on an interpretation of the church record in Warren in light of his son's testimony and is far from being conclusive. Unfortunately, the early church records burned in the great conflagration of Pittsburgh in 1845 and thus cannot be consulted to settle this point.¹⁴

¹⁴Mr. Thomas J. Gregory interprets the evidence differently in his forthcoming study on Sidney Rigdon. He assumes the chronology of the *Times and Seasons* to be correct and believes that Rigdon's move to Warren was necessitated by the resignation of Adamson Bentley, the previous minister. The amelioration of ecclesiastical affairs brought about a reinstitution of the old minister and thus shattered Rigdon's original hopes of becoming minister there. And yet, "for some reason which can only be guessed at—perhaps to study with Bentley—Rigdon decided to join the Warren Church and was accepted as a member on 4 March 1820" (pp. 4–5). This reconstruction has no verification from the sources. The church record in Warren does not evidence such a motivation on Rigdon's part. It is silent about Sidney Rigdon until his placing membership in March of 1820. Furthermore, it would be psychologically unsound to assume a cordial rapprochement of Rigdon and Bentley in March of 1820 had Rigdon previously hoped to benefit from the church strife. Besides, the time during which Adamson Bentley asked to be released from his "pastoral care" was very short, short enough to make a request of this capable independent congregation for outside ministerial help unlikely.

Despite my disagreement with Thomas J. Gregory on this issue, his forthcoming study on Sidney Rigdon is on the whole the most thorough treatment yet offered. For its employment of primary sources alone, the study will prove to become a *sine qua non* for future research on Sidney Rigdon. Thanks are due to Mr. Gregory for providing me with a copy of his research and for suggesting a few more sources for Rigdon's early life.

The early history of Sidney Rigdon emerges as follows:

In 1817 he became a member of Peter's Creek Baptist Church.¹⁵ Founded in 1773, Peter's Creek Baptist Church originally belonged to the old Redstone Baptist Association¹⁶ and later, in 1840, to the Pittsburgh Association, whose churches were situated "in different directions around the city, but mostly south and east."¹⁷ The Reverend David Philips, Rigdon's pastor, a native of Wales and the outstanding preacher of the district, had held the longest pastorate in the church's history. Still, during his tenure as minister the former

¹⁵Peter's Creek Baptist Church in Library, Pennsylvania, is still in existence today. Sidney Rigdon's presence there in 1817 is attested by a fragile old sheet of paper, taken from a larger notebook, with the following notation: "A list of Members of the Peters Creek Regural [*sic*] Baptist from its organisation [*sic*] in 1773 to the present time as near as can be ascertained [*sic*] to the present time . . . 1817 Sidney Rigdon." According to the church's historian, Mrs. Vaughn P. Chapman, the list seems to have been compiled in the late 1800s from older records (personal communication of 24 May 1978). Robert Patterson, "Solomon Spaulding and the Book of Mormon," in *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania with Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men*, ed. Boyd Crumrine (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co, 1872), p. 431, gives 31 May 1817 as the date of Rigdon's joining Peter's Creek church. Samuel Williams, minister of the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh from 1827 to 1856, reports the following details regarding Rigdon's conversion and stay at Peter's Creek:

Sidney Rigdon was reared on a farm about twelve miles from the city of Pittsburgh, situated near to the Peter's Creek Baptist House of worship. He professed to experience a change of heart when a young man, and proposed to join the church under the care of Elder David Philips. But there was so much miracle about his conversion, and so much parade about his profession, that the pious and discerning Pastor, entertained serious doubts at the time in regard to the genuineness of the work. He was received, however, by the church, and baptised by the Pastor, with some fears and doubts upon his mind. Very soon, Diotrefes like, he began to put himself forward and seek the preeminence, and was well nigh supplanting the tried and faithful minister who had reared, and nursed, and fed the church, for a long series of years. So thoroughly convinced was father Philips by this time, that he was not possessed of the spirit of Christ, notwithstanding his miraculous conversion, and flippant speech, that he declared his belief, "that as long as he (Sidney) should live, he would be a curse to the church of Christ!" (S. Williams, *Mormonism Exposed* [Pittsburgh: n.p., (1842?)], pp. 1-2; the title is not listed in Chad J. Flake's *A Mormon Bibliography: 1830-1930* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1978].)

Williams's remarks on Rigdon's character may well be anti-Mormon projections into the early life of the apostate. The intensity of anti-Mormon feeling among the Baptists is well illustrated in I. M. Allen's sketch of the Pittsburgh church in *The United States Baptist Annual Register and Almanac, 1833* (Philadelphia: T. W. Upstick, 1833), p. 131:

His [John Davis's] successor was Mr. Sidney Rigdon, a superficial, flippant man, who for a season promised some usefulness, but, soon embracing the errors of Alexander Campbell, rent the church in pieces, until only fourteen out of ninety-six members remained on the original ground of their constitution. After prosecuting the work of destruction for two years, Mr. Rigdon was excluded from the connection. He then engaged in the business of destroying churches and propagating Campbellism in the State of Ohio, until he found the book of Mormon to be superior to the Bible for the accomplishment of his favorite object—the common-stock system. This infatuated man is now deluding the ignorant, and transporting his disciples to the New Jerusalem, where they are starving for the necessities of life.

For a historical sketch of the church, see Pankey, *Churches of the Pittsburgh Baptist Association*, pp. 3-6. A church history covering the early period, written on the occasion of the church's 125th anniversary, is reprinted in *Centenary*, pp. 146-49.

¹⁶On the origin and early history of the Redstone Baptist Association, see David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (Boston: By the Author, 1813), 1: 598-602.

¹⁷David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (New York: Lewis Colby, 1848), pp. 616-17 (entirely different edition from the one mentioned in footnote 16).

officer in Washington's army and company chief in the War of Independence opposed the Baptist reformers under the leadership of Alexander Campbell and resigned his pastorate in 1824 "by reason of the infirmities of age."¹⁸ Sidney Rigdon may have started his education for the ministry under the Reverend Philips.¹⁹

In 1818 Sidney moved to North Sewickley on the Connoquenessing River, where he studied for the ministry under the Reverend Andrew Clark, at that time minister of the Providence Regular Baptist Church. Rigdon's arrival there is attested in the minutes of the Providence church with these words: "Feb the 27 1819 Church met [and] opened by Singing & prayer 1st Br Clark stands Moderator 2nd received & read a letter of Dismission Br Sidney Rigdon from the Church of Peters Creek and received him on the same."²⁰

The Providence church belonged to the Beaver Baptist Association, which had been formed in 1810 and which was made up of Regular Baptist churches of the border area of Pennsylvania and Ohio. Andrew Clark, who served the church from 1814 to 1820, had been accepted in 1815 by the Association as an ordained minister.²¹ He succeeded Sidney's cousin Thomas Rigdon, an influential preacher of the Association.²² As there were no Baptist theological institutions on the Western Reserve, Sidney Rigdon served as ministerial apprentice with Andrew Clark, learning whatever he could from the experienced minister.

¹⁸Benedict, *General History* (1848), p. 617, and Lauderbaugh, *175th Anniversary of Peters Creek Baptist Church: Library, Pa (1773-1948)*, pp. 22-23. Pankey, *Churches of the Pittsburgh Baptist Association*, pp. 3-4, has David Philips serve for forty-four years, from 1780 to 1824. The illustrious, and later controversial, man had settled in Library after the War of Independence. Before that, he and his three brothers—who had come to America in 1758—had held commissions in Washington's army, had raised a company, and had been its officers. (*Centenary*, p. 100.)

¹⁹Keller, ed., "A Son's Record of Sidney Rigdon," p. 20; however, *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 May 1843): 177 does not affirm this.

²⁰Providence Minutes, MS, p. 95.

²¹The enigmatic resolution regarding Clark's ministerial status reads: "Resolved that the association consider the ordination of Brother Andrew Clark valid; although contrary to the established rules of this body; but as those concerned labored under want of information, the association forebear [*sic*] to censure" (*Beaver Baptist Association Minutes* [1815], p. 4). Andrew Clark—a native of Pennsylvania—was first licensed to preach by the Unity church in 1813. One of the co-founders of this church (founded in 1808) was Thomas Rigdon (*History of the Churches of the Beaver Baptist Association: From 1809 to 1860* [Pittsburgh: W. S. Haven, 1860], pp. 10-11).

²²*History of the Churches of the Beaver Baptist Association*, p. 7; "History of Providence Baptist Church," *Beaver Minutes* (1913), p. 41. Thomas Rigdon was an influential activist of the Association. He served intermittently as clerk of the Association, participated on many committees, drafted circular letters, and preached the introductory sermons for the Association meetings. Already in 1810, when the first annual meeting was held, Thomas Rigdon is listed as its clerk. At that time he was still a licensed minister of the Regular Baptist Church in New Lisbon, which requested his ordination at the same meeting in 1810 (cf. *Beaver Minutes* [1810], p. 4). He was ordained on 27 October 1810 with the assistance of Sidney Rigdon's future co-worker in Warren—Adamson Bentley—and David Philips (cf. *Beaver Minutes* [1811], p. 3). Thomas Rigdon served several churches of the Association: Providence (1813-1814), Achor (1816-1818), and Unity (1824ff.) (cf. *History of the Churches of the Beaver Baptist Association*, pp. 7, 10, 14). He is also listed as minister of the Eliza church in 1818 (*Beaver Minutes* [1818], p. 3).

Although there was little formal ministerial education at that time, the Association throughout its history searched for an adequate *modus docendi*. In 1812 the Sharon church collected money for the education of young men entering the ministry, and as early as 1813 the Association raised questions in its annual meeting regarding such education.²³ In 1814 the Association recommended “the friends of the Baptist cause” provide patronage and support for the education of ministers,²⁴ and in 1815 eighty dollars had been collected for destitute ministerial candidates.²⁵ In 1816 the Association took concrete measures to provide a more formal framework for educating its future ministers. Following the example of Baptists in the Eastern States, the annual meeting resolved to draft a constitution for a “Baptist Theological Society for the education of pious young men for the Gospel ministry”; and the go ahead was given for soliciting financial support from the churches for the education of young ministers.²⁶ Included on the committee to draft the constitution for the Baptist Theological Society were Thomas Rigdon and Andrew Clark. For reasons unknown to the public, this resolution was rescinded in 1817, and the rather informal theological and practical apprenticeship was retained.²⁷

In 1819 when the Association held its annual meeting in New Lisbon, Columbiana County, Ohio, Sidney Rigdon’s name appears for the first time in its minutes.²⁸ He and John Rigdon,²⁹ another minister cousin, were invited to seats in the Association and both were part of a committee which drafted the “Circular Letter” that year. At the same meeting Andrew Clark, Adamson Bentley, and another minister were appointed to a committee which was to consider the ordination of Sidney Rigdon, provided the church applied for this ordination.³⁰ Until this time he had served only as a “licensed” minister.

The distinction between an “ordained” and a “licensed” minister was a real one on the American frontier, even though the responsibilities of the “licensed” ministers at times coincided with

²³*Beaver Minutes* (1812), p. 5; *Beaver Minutes* (1813), pp. 3–4.

²⁴*Beaver Minutes* (1814), p. 4.

²⁵*Beaver Minutes* (1815), p. 4.

²⁶*Beaver Minutes* (1816), pp. 4–6.

²⁷*Beaver Minutes* (1817), p. 5.

²⁸*Beaver Minutes* (1819), pp. 4–6.

²⁹Besides Thomas Rigdon, his two brothers John and Charles were Baptist ministers in the Beaver Association (cf. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples*, p. 92). All four men—Sidney, Thomas, John, and Charles Rigdon—had at one time been members of Peter’s Creek church. After the division of the Beaver Baptist Association, Sidney’s cousins were active in the Mohican Baptist Association. In his sketch of this association, David Benedict confuses Sidney with John Rigdon (see Benedict, *General History* [1848], p. 888).

³⁰*Beaver Minutes* (1819), p. 6.

those of the "ordained" ones. William Warren Sweet distinguishes the two types as follows:

There were two types of Baptist preachers on the frontier, the "licensed" and the "ordained." Licensing a preacher was the first step in the making of a Baptist preacher after he had been permitted to "exercise his gifts" by vote of the church. These licensed ministers frequently served in much the same way that the "local" or "lay" preachers among the Methodists served. That is they preached more or less at large. Frequently a congregation had several of these licensed preachers in the membership and many a Baptist church on the frontier was first gathered and finally organized by these licensed preachers. Frequently "licensed" preachers were called to take regular charge of congregations, when they were generally ordained.³¹

In order to guard against irregular ministers' taking advantage of the frontier churches,³² the Beaver Baptist Association had retained the power "to see that persons properly qualified, are ordained pastors in the churches, and to prevent them from being imposed [upon] by irregular ministers."³³

However, before Sidney Rigdon was ordained, he may have left for a short interim charge in Pittsburgh.³⁴ As demonstrated previously from the church record, he arrived in Warren on 4 March 1820.³⁵ Concord, the Baptist church in Warren, had been formed on 3 September 1803.³⁶ On 19 May 1810 Adamson Bentley became its minister, and during his tenure he became the most influential preacher of the Association. He and Sidney Rigdon were further destined to become leaders in the introduction of the Baptist reform movement of Alexander Campbell in that area. After his arrival in Warren, Sidney took residence with his future brother-in-law, Adamson Bentley,³⁷ and shortly thereafter, on 1 April, Sidney preached a sermon at the church's "regular monthly meeting." At the same

³¹See William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830* (New York: Henry Holt, 1931), p. 40. For the distinction between the two types of ministers, the "ordained" one and the "licensed" one, see chapter three, "The Frontier Baptist Preacher and the Frontier Baptist Church," pp. 36-57, especially pp. 39-41. Note also the information on p. 40, footnote 8, that "a licensed preacher could only preach, while an ordained preacher might also administer the sacraments." See also pp. 40-41, footnote 8, for the texts of a "Form of ministerial license" and a "Certificate of Ordination."

³²That such imposition was a problem is attested by the occasional warning issued by the Beaver Association in its minutes, e.g., for 1817, p. 5.

³³"Constitution and Rules of Decorum of the Beaver Baptist Association," *Beaver Minutes* (1815), p. 10; for the discussion of ordination cf. also the Association's answer to the query of the Bethesda church: "We believe that it is scriptural for one minister in certain cases to ordain another, when he is fully satisfied of his qualifications and have the unanimous request of the church to which he belongs" (*Beaver Minutes* [1819], pp. 4-5; cf. also *Beaver Minutes* [1820], p. 5).

³⁴See fns. 7-11.

³⁵See fn. 8.

³⁶For this and the following, see Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples*, pp. 91-92.

³⁷For biographical sketches of A. Bentley, see Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples*, pp. 102-109, and William Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott: With Sketches of His Fellow Laborers, William Hayden, Adamson Bentley, John Henry, and Others* (1874; reprint ed., Nashville: Gospel Advocate, n.d.), pp. 135-39.

time, the church record attests, “Bro Rigdon requested a certificate from the Church stating his standing with us as a Member in fellowship and a lisensed [*sic*] Minister of the Gospel, which was granted.”³⁸ Also on 29 April he preached to the congregation.³⁹ It appears that sometime between April and August of 1820 Sidney Rigdon must have been ordained, for when the Beaver Baptist Association held its annual meeting on 24 to 26 August in Connoquenessing it could report:

In the 29th article of last year’s minutes, there was a committee appointed to set apart, by ordination, the Rev. brethren Joshua Brown and Sidney Rigdon; which committee report that they have ordained the above brethren, according to the appointment of the Association.⁴⁰

Close to his ordination date, Sidney was married to Phebe Brook on 12 June 1820.⁴¹

Although Sidney Rigdon was ordained and held residence in Warren, his ministry was that of an evangelist traveling in the Western Reserve, holding evangelistic meetings and preaching for small churches which could not afford a regular minister. John Wycliffe Rigdon writes that while residing in Warren his father had no “particular charge,” but rather “whenever a vacancy occurred in the country, he always filled it, and in that way acquired a reputation for being a very eloquent preacher.”⁴² In the six months after his arrival, Sidney Rigdon and Adamson Bentley baptized in Warren and vicinity “upward of ninety persons.”⁴³

Another event took place during 1820 which would eventually prove significant for the spread of the Baptist reform movement, the future Disciples or Churches of Christ. The Beaver Baptist Association was divided and the newly formed Mahoning Association would become the future seedbed for Alexander Campbell’s views.⁴⁴ At the annual meeting of the Association in 1819, the committee appointed for dividing the Association reported:

Inasmuch as several churches have requested a division of the association, we reply that we give our free consent; and we recommend to

³⁸Record, Warren Central Christian Church, p. 71.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰*Beaver Minutes* (1820), p. 4. All the dates given for Rigdon’s ordination by modern historians have thus to be revised or rendered more precise. Milton V. Backman considers Sidney Rigdon ordained since 1819; whereas F. Mark McKiernan, following Daryl Chase, places the ordination vaguely between 1819 and 1822 (see Milton V. Backman, “The Quest for a Restoration: The Birth of Mormonism in Ohio,” *BYU Studies* 12 [Summer 1972]: 352; McKiernan, *The Voice*, p. 71; Daryl Chase, “Sidney Rigdon,” pp. 12–13).

⁴¹*Times and Seasons* 4 (1 May 1843): 177.

⁴²Rigdon, Lecture Notes, p. 6; Keller, ed., “A Son’s Record of Sidney Rigdon,” p. 20.

⁴³*Beaver Minutes* (1820), p. 27.

⁴⁴On the Association, its history and that of its individual churches, see *History of the Churches of the Beaver Baptist Association: From 1809 to 1860*.

divide into three parts, and for general lines we propose the state line between Ohio and Pennsylvania, and another on the Tuscarawas; and the churches wishing for division are at liberty to constitute when they think proper; and the Pennsylvania division will be considered the old association, retaining the name of "Beaver Association," and will meet at the time and place stated in the minutes, and the other divisions will make their own arrangements.⁴⁵

It was further voted "that the churches in the middle division of this Association meet at the church Salem by their delegates, on Friday before the 4th Lord's day in October next, as a convention to organize those churches into an association; and that the churches in the Western division meet by their delegates for the same purpose on the Friday before the 4th Lord's day in June next, in church Eliza."⁴⁶ The old Beaver Association met, however, once more from 24 to 26 August 1820, at which time the report of Rigdon's ordination was communicated to the Association, and Sidney was asked with his mentor Bentley and cousin Charles to draft the "Corresponding Letter" for the year.⁴⁷ Four days later, on Wednesday, 30 August 1820, the "middle division" of the old Beaver Association met at Salem, where Andrew Clark was now minister, and formed the Mahoning Association, covering the counties of Trumbull, Portage, Mahoning, and some of Columbiana County and consisting of the churches of Warren, New Lisbon, Nelson, Youngstown, Salem, Randolph, Liberty, Mount Hope, Bazetta, and Braceville.⁴⁸ The Association adopted as its statement of faith that of the old Beaver Association.⁴⁹

Change, however, came quickly when Adamson Bentley and Sidney Rigdon joined the reform camp under Alexander Campbell, who not only opposed the severe Calvinism of the Regular Baptists

⁴⁵*Beaver Minutes* (1819), p. 6.

⁴⁶*Ibid.* The other association formed was the Mohican Baptist Association. An activist in this association was Thomas Rigdon. Despite an extensive search, I was able to ascertain only the minutes for 1824–1825.

⁴⁷*Beaver Minutes* (1820), p. 4. The "Corresponding Letter" served as a means of communication between the various Baptist associations. David Benedict, the American Baptist historian, describes the origin and development of this practice as follows:

The way in which our people at all distances communicated with each other as to the state of their churches and their general affairs, was by means of corresponding letters for this purpose, from one association to another. In process of time, these letters were printed in the minutes of the associations; but when I first began to attend some of the oldest bodies of this kind [early 1800s], they appointed men on the spot to write to all with which they had agreed to correspond; the letters thus formed were sent to them in manuscript. . . . The next step was to prepare one letter of a general character for all corresponding associations, some of which were in distant States, and to print it in the minutes. (David Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists* [New York: Sheldon, 1860], p. 87.)

⁴⁸*Minutes of the Mahoning Baptist Association* (1820), pp. 1–2; the minutes can be found as "Appendix C: Minutes of the Mahoning Baptist Association (1820–1827)," in Mary Agnes Smith, "A History of the Mahoning Baptist Association" (M.A. thesis, West Virginia University, Morgantown, 1943), pp. 1–40.

⁴⁹Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples*, p. 29; the full texts of its theological statements are given as appendices A and B in Smith, "A History of the Mahoning Baptist Association."

but also advocated a more emphatic doctrine of faith, repentance, and baptism, as well as the disavowal of the normative character of the Old Testament for "New Testament churches," weekly communion, a radical rejection of all forms of polity and church life not expressly commanded in the scriptures, the weakening of a professional clergy, and a unification scheme among the churches on the basis of the "Bible only."⁵⁰ Adamson Bentley had been impressed when reading Campbell's debate with Walker on baptism. In the summer of 1821 when traveling through Virginia, Brothers Bentley and Rigdon visited Alexander Campbell at Buffaloe (the future Bethany, West Virginia) and after a day and a night's stay both men were won over to the reform cause.⁵¹ Later, in 1823 when the opposition from within the Baptists to Campbell's reforming views had grown dangerously and threatened the expulsion of his Brush Run Church from the Redstone Association, he and the newly formed Wellsburg church joined the Mahoning Association. They were thus protected from further persecution while retaining association with the Baptists. However, the logical consequence of Campbell's theological views, to permit in church polity only those designs specifically commanded in holy writ, was self-destructive to the Association and led in 1830 to the abolition of the Mahoning Association altogether.

During his stay with Adamson Bentley, Sidney became a successful preacher, only occasionally preaching in his hometown, Warren.⁵²

From 5 to 6 September 1821, Sidney was a member in the council of the Mahoning Baptist Association, convening that year at Palmyra, Portage County, Ohio. At the meeting, he was asked to

⁵⁰Vehicles of Campbell's views during this time, besides his eloquent preaching, were his journal *The Christian Baptist* (1823–1830) and two well-publicized debates: one on 19 and 20 June 1820 with John Walker, a Seceder Presbyterian minister, on the topic of baptism; the other in May 1823 with the Presbyterian William L. Maccalla, at which time Sidney Rigdon served as secretary. Still the best concise treatment of Campbell's thought in its historical context is provided by Winfred Ernest Garrison in the book coauthored with Alfred T. DeGroot—*The Disciples of Christ: A History* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1958). For our period, cf. pp. 162–79, 201–206. For further literature on the movement, consult the bibliographical essay in Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1975), pp. 463–88. Regarding A. Campbell's differences with and ultimate separation from the Baptists, see his journals *The Christian Baptist* and *The Millennial Harbinger*. See also Benjamin Franklin and T. J. Fisher, *Debate on Some of the Distinctive Differences between the Reformers and Baptists* (Louisville: G. W. Robertson, 1858). Scholarly literature on the subject includes the following studies: Errett Gates, *The Early Relation and Separation of the Baptists and Disciples* (Chicago: Christian Century, 1904); Leo Ashby, "Influence of Alexander Campbell upon the Separation of Disciples and Baptists" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, Lexington, 1949); Thomas Elmer Pletcher, "Alexander Campbell's Controversy with the Baptists" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 1955).

⁵¹Cf. the report of the visit in A. Campbell's historical reminiscences in the *Millennial Harbinger*, 3rd ser., 5 (1848): 523; also reprinted in Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 2: 44–45.

⁵²There is an entry in the church record of 1 September 1821, on which date Sidney Rigdon preached in Warren; but otherwise he was mainly on the circuit.

become the Association's messenger to the Grand River Association and to write the "Corresponding Letter" for the next year.⁵³

On 2 December 1821, nearly one-and-a-half years after their marriage, Rigdon's wife Phebe was baptized. The church record of 1 December 1821 reads:

Examined Phebe Rigdon in regard to her religious exercise of mind and received her for baptism. Lordsday Dec. 2, Sister Phebe Rigdon was baptised.⁵⁴

Alexander Campbell, who in 1821 still had some influence in the Redstone Association, to which the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh belonged, perhaps helped Sidney get a pastorate at this church.⁵⁵ Sidney Rigdon left Warren on 5 January 1822. The church record attests Rigdon and his wife's departure with the words: "Bro. Bentley being absent Br. Rigdon was appointed moderator and Bro. B. Austin Clerk (pro tem). Br. S. Rigdon and Phebe his wife requested letters of dismission to the Baptist Church at Pittsburgh which was granted."⁵⁶

⁵³Smith, "A History of the Mahoning Baptist Association, Appendix C," pp. 6-7. The latter task remained unattended because of Rigdon's removal to the Pittsburgh church, which was under the jurisdiction of the Redstone Baptist Association.

⁵⁴Record, Warren Central Christian Church, p. 79.

⁵⁵Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 2: 46. The First Church of Pittsburgh was founded in 1812. Sidney Rigdon, who succeeded John Davis, was its fourth minister (cf. Benedict, *General History* [1848], p. 617, and the church histories listed in footnote 10).

⁵⁶Record, Warren Central Christian Church, p. 79.