

George W. Benson

1808 – 1879



“What did the Community stand for?”

George Benson

Introduction:

We stand before 615 Riverside Drive, the home of George and Catherine Benson and their seven children. They were the first family to move here with the intention of starting a community in 1841. They lived here for ten years. He was always an important leader in the Community. He was an original investor who put up his own money (along with other partners) to purchase the property that became the Northampton Association of Education and Industry (NAEI). He was elected President of the Association in 1842.

“Who was George Benson?”

- What kind of family did he come from? Briefly describe its connection to the abolitionist movement. (Doc. A)
- What kind of work did he do before moving to Florence? (Doc. A)
- Famed “radical abolitionist” William Lloyd Garrison described two important events in his recent life here: he married George’s youngest sister Helen and was welcomed into the Benson family; and he helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society. What was this? Does this sound like dangerous work? Do you think the two men were close friends? What effect do you think this had on the Association George helped found? (Doc. B)

“How did he help form the Community?”

- How did he raise the money to help buy the property that became the Community? Do you think this was a risky thing to do? (Doc. C)
- He found a small group of partners to help him buy the property. They bought the Northampton Silk Company from Mr. Whitmarsh. Why do you think Whitmarsh was “obliged to sell”? Did this mean they got a good price? What did they buy? Describe. (Doc. D)
- What is meant by a “nucleus”? This is a term used in biology. What kind of people were attracted to join? What were they looking for? (Doc. E) Describe “reformers” for us.
- What was the one cause that everyone who moved there supported? What were other causes supported there? Describe “non-resistance” and “temperance” for us. (Doc. F)

“Who were the ‘Come-Outers’?”

- Many other young families followed the Bensons and sold their farms and businesses and moved to Florence. They left behind financial security, extended family, and the institutions most important to them – their churches. Except that many had already left their churches before they left home. Some were expelled. Why? (Doc.F)
- Many Community members “resigned their membership in the churches”. Why? Was it

because they were not religious? What were their churches doing or not doing that made “come-outers” so angry? (Doc. G)

—Members felt deeply betrayed by their ministers and congregations. Why do you think they felt so strongly? (Docs. G,H)

—How did the regular church-goers living in Northampton look upon the “come-outers” living in the Community? What do you think “lower region” referred to? (Doc. G)

“How did they practice religion in the Community?”

—“No religious creed” meant that there was no religious test for joining the Community. This meant that families who were members of any religious sect could join. This was very unusual for a utopian community. Why do you think? “Trammels of sect” (Doc. E) referred to the fact that most sects, or religious denominations, did not get along at this time. How did members of these various sects living together in Community work out their differences? (Doc. I)

—Community members were free to practice, or not practice religion as they wished. A situation arose when a young couple living in the Community wanted to get married and Massachusetts law required the presence of a state official or an ordained minister. How did Benson react to this situation? Describe his feelings about the “true nature of marriage” and religion in general. What did he think about the ordained clergy? What about the church building itself? Where was the wedding ceremony held? (Docs. J,K)

NOTES ON SOURCES

- A A family history of the Benson Family. Adapted from *The Communitarian Moment* by Christopher Clark (1995).
- B Letter from William Lloyd Garrison to George Benson, September 12, 1834.
- C Letter from William Lloyd Garrison to George Benson, January 7, 1841.
- D From “Community Life,” in *Dolly Witter Stetson*, by Kate DeNormandie Wilson, 1907.
- E Former Community member Frances Judd writing in American Socialisms (1870).
- F Frances Judd memoir (1894).
- G Memoir by Arthur Hill, who grew up in the Community (1912).
- H Frederick Douglass, London Address (1846).
- I See E.
- J *Hampshire Gazette*, June 14, 1844.
- K Letter from Community member Almira Stetson to her father James, June 3, 1844.

A **George W. Benson** came from a family of abolitionists. His father, George Benson, Sr. (1752-1836) was part of the old anti-slavery movement that started right after the Revolutionary War. He was made an honorary member of America's first anti-slavery society in Pennsylvania and was named president of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1834.

Father and son were both successful wool and leather merchants in Rhode Island. They sold their businesses and turned to farming in the small village of Brooklyn, Connecticut. George W. married Catherine Stetson in 1833 and they had six children, the last three born at the Northampton Association.

B

Freedom's Cottage, }
Roxbury, Sept. 12, 1854. } 50

My dear George:

A year ago, I was just about half way across the Atlantic, between England and the United States, as little dreaming that I should be a married man within twelve months, as that I should occupy the chair of his holiness the Pope. At that time I knew nothing of ~~Sturtevant's~~ ^{Freedom's} Cottage, and my acquaintance with Helen was too slight to authorize me to hope that a union for life might take place between us. [It has been the most eventful year in my history. I have been the occasion of many up-
roars, and a continual disturber of the public peace. As soon as I landed, I turned the city of New-York upside down. Five thousand people turned out to see me tarred and feathered, but were disappointed. There was also a small hubbub in Boston on my arrival. The excitement passed away, but invective and calumny still followed me. By dint of some industry and much persuasion, I succeeded in inducing the abolitionists in New-York to join our little band in Boston, in calling a National Convention at Philadelphia. We met — and such a body of men, for zeal, firmness, integrity, benevolence and moral greatness, the world has rarely seen in a single assembly. Inscribed upon a Declaration which it was my exalted privilege to write, their names can perish only with the knowledge of the history of our times. A National Anti-Slavery Society was formed, which astonished the country by its novelty, and ^{it} by its boldness. In five months its first annual meeting was held in the identical city, in which, only seven antecedent months, abolitionists were in fear of their lives! — In ability, interest and solemnity, it took precedence of all the great religious celebrations which took place at the same time. During the same month, a New-England Anti-Slavery Convention was held in Boston, and so judicious were its measures, so eloquent its appeals,

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TO GEORGE W. BENSON

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TO GEORGE W. BENSON

Boston, Jan. 7, 1841.

My dear George:

So! you have sold yourself out of house and home! Then "the world is all before you where to choose" another abode, as it was to Adam when he was expelled from Paradise. Now, your name is not Adam, but Benson and Brooklyn is not Paradise, though it is certainly a very pleasant country town. You may shed "some natural tears," as our first parent did, (so Milton says,) at the thought of parting but, never mind it - a thousand years hence, it will be a very trifling matter to us and to the world. I hope the seller and buyer of your estate have both traded to good advantage, and are both equally satisfied with the transfer. Where do you intend to locate yourself? I say, you must come somewhere in this vicinity. Do you hear? What say you to a little social community among ourselves? Bro. Chace is ready for it; and I think we must be pretty bad folks if we cannot live together amicably within gunshot of each other. My Garrisonian battery shall not harm any of you, unless you new organize, go for a third party, or apologize for slavery. In that case, look out!

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D The opportunity to purchase just the right place for such an undertaking came when Mr. Whitmarsh, who spent a fortune in the mulberry craze, was obliged to sell a valuable property in the western part of Northampton, called Broughton Meadows, consisting of beautiful land on both sides of Mill river. There were a four-story brick silk factory, two or three farmhouses, a boarding house, and several other buildings ready for occupancy on the estate. Sam'l L. Hill and George W. Benson and others bought this property and conceived the idea of making a community after the Fourier plan.

They induced several families and some single people to join them, all of fine moral and intellectual character, who were willing to make sacrifices in order to benefit the world.

There were reformers, idealists. liberalists and some cranks. Education was one great object, there were schools with all the newest methods, including a kindergarten, and the finest teachers.

⑤ “*By Mrs. Judson, for me, through G. W. Benson, Williamsburg, February 14 1853.*”

MEMOIR.

“The Northampton Association of Education and Industry had its origin in the aspiration of a few individuals for a better and purer state of society—for freedom from the trammels of sect and bigotry, and an opportunity of carrying out their principles, socially, religiously, and otherwise, without restraint from the prevailing practices of the world around.

“The projectors of this enterprise were Messrs. David Mack, Samuel L. Hill, George W. Benson and William Adam. These, with several others who were induced to unite with them, in all ten persons, held their first meeting April 8 1842, organized the Association, and adopted a preamble, constitution and by-laws.

“This little band formed the nucleus, around which a large number soon clustered, all thinking, intelligent persons; all, or nearly all, seeing and feeling the imperfections of existing society, and seeking a purer, more free and elevated position as regards religion, politics, business, &c. It would not be true to say that *all* the members of the Community were imbued with the true spirit of reform; but the leading minds were sincere reformers, earnest, truthful souls, sincerely desiring to advance the cause of truth and liberty. Some were young persons, attracted thither by friends, or coming there to seek employment on the same terms as members, and afterwards applying for full membership.

F The association was formed. New people constantly came, drawn by sympathy of views on one subject or another; all were earnest in the anti-slavery cause; many were deeply interested in non-resistance; all were temperance people and some had suffered expulsion from the churches for their course on anti-slavery or other matters. They came together, and the former inhabitants of this rural hamlet looked on with suspicion and distrust at this new order of things. These people, who had invaded their formerly quiet domain, had such strange notions; many of them imbued with Quaker ideas and thinking all days alike holy. Some did not reverence the church and priesthood; some were advocates of vegetarianism, discarding animal food and all stimulating drinks. No wonder we were "past finding out." I do not know that any of our people were immoral, or that their neighbors could accuse them of dishonesty in their dealings, or anything worse than their disregard of outward religious observances.

ANTI-SLAVERY DAYS IN FLORENCE

by Arthur G. Hill

G The churches of the North, of each denomination, being affiliated with those of the South, would have nothing to do with the Anti-Slavery work and proved a great stumbling block in the pathway of the reformers, opposing and denouncing them as disturbers.

The minister of eleven denominations generally refused to let the subject of slavery be discussed in the churches, and endeavored in every way, by word and action, to suppress the agitation. For this suppression by the religious teachers of free speech in a great moral issue, contrary to their profession of being followers of their great humanitarian leader, led one of the Anti-Slavery speakers to declare in each of his discourses, that "the American Churches were the bulwark of American slavery." Certainly it did so seem, for by their opposition, so un-Christlike, the mobs were incited and encouraged to do deeds of violence against the apostles of freedom, and the life of the curse of slavery was greatly prolonged. Judged by the action of the churches at that time, if Jesus were to appear again upon earth, he would be likely to be again crucified, without their interference, if he were to preach humanitarian doctrines contrary to their set notions.

Many members of different churches, however, had their consciences awakened and courageously resigned their membership in the churches, preferring to worship alone rather than with sympathizers with slaveholders. They were then stigmatized by their late associates as "come-outers" and "infidels". To escape the neighbors that thus made it unpleasant for them, many sought new homes and associates.

About 1840, a number of families of come-outers, brought together in sympathy by correspondence, gathered from several towns in Connecticut, from New Hampshire, from Cambridge and Boston in this state, from New York and other places, came to this place, then called Warner District in Northampton, seeking, as did our forefathers, a haven where God would be worshipped in their conscience-awakened way, bearing testimony against slavery and doing what they were able to do in arousing the country to the enormity of holding fellow beings in bondage.

These come-outers were all deeply religious people, feeling aggrieved at the un-Christian thoughts and acts of their former fellow-worshippers. They held weekly religious meetings, and led pure and honest lives, earning the respect of the citizens of Northampton for their honesty and reliability, but sentenced by them to seats in the lower region.

H I love the religion of our blessed Saviour, I love that religion that comes from above, in the “wisdom of God, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” I love that religion that sends its votaries to bind up the wounds of him that has fallen among thieves. I love that religion that makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction. I love that religion that is based upon the glorious principle, of love to God and love to man (cheers); which makes its followers do unto others as they themselves would be done by. If you demand liberty to yourself, it says, grant it to your neighbours. If you claim a right to think for yourselves, it says, allow your neighbours the same right. If you claim to act for yourselves, it says, allow your neighbours the same right. It is because I love this religion that I hate the slave-holding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion that exists in the southern states of America. (Immense cheering.) It is because I regard the one as good, and pure, and holy, that I cannot but regard the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. Loving the one I must hate the other, holding to the one I must reject the other, and I, therefore, proclaim myself an infidel to the slave-holding religion of America. (Reiterated cheers.)

I “As might be inferred from what has been said, there was no religious creed, and no particular form of religious worship enjoined. A meeting was sustained on the first day of the week most of the time while the Association existed, in which various subjects were discussed, and all had the right and an opportunity of expressing their opinions or personal feelings. Of course a great variety of views and sentiments were introduced. As the religious sentiment is strong in most minds, this introduction of every phase of religious belief was very exciting, producing in some dissatisfaction ; in others, the shaking of all their preconceived views ; and probably resulting in greater liberality and more charitable feelings in all.”

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MARRIED—At the Northampton Association, on Sunday, the 21st inst., George Ashley and Eliza Forward. This occurrence, though not wholly divested from the interference of the State, was nevertheless an interesting one. The parties, together with most of the members of the Community, assembled in their *summer church*—in Nature's own temple—under the spreading branches of a large pine tree. George W. Benson commenced the services, by stating that the parties had come there for the purpose of making a public acknowledgement of their union in marriage. He proceeded to speak at some length of the interesting, important and responsible relation of husband and wife, and of the duties devolving on each. He set forth the true nature of marriage, as an institution of heaven, and said that the union of true souls in that relation was registered on high, and that it is indissoluble. He regarded the intermeddling of human authority with the holy connexion as usurping a prerogative of Deity. He presumed that the parties who had come before that audience to make public declaration of their connexion, had duly considered the subject, and that they were *really* united; and, disclaiming any feeling of disrespect for the magistrate then present, who he trusted was acting conscientiously, he said that he regarded them as *one*—as *already married*—and that their obligations to each other were now *mutual and perpetual*. The scene was deeply impressive, and it was evidently felt by those who witnessed it, that the legal ceremony which was about to follow was but a useless form. The magistrate proceeded, in a summary way, to exact the customary pledge of fidelity, and then pronounced them *legally* married. An appropriate song from the young people, followed by hearty congratulations, closed the scene.—*Communicated.*

K

Almira B. Stetson and Mary Stetson to James A. Stetson

Monday Evening. [June 3, 1844]

To my father,

The bundle of silk has not gone yet and so I thought that I must acknowledge the receipt of your short letters today by Giles. We of course were very glad to have them. I trust that in your excitement of Temperance processions Antislavery meetings and shop keeping, you will not forget our little festiveitis

Yesterday George Ashley was married up under the "pine tree". Uncle George Benson, got up and said some few things among others that Mr Warner's the justice of peace that he considered it an emblem of a corrupt state of public opinion that he was present and that his presence was necessary in order to have this brother and sister married. Tuesday Uncle George came with Grandmother Saturday night and he staid untill Monday morning He seemed to like the place very well, and seemed entertained at the meetings, and wedding. I believe that all the people are well in Brooklyn. Lincoln Martin is dead. died about 10 days ago. We had quite an arrival last night only ~~evt~~ eleven, to be accomidated. It is astonishing how this factory streches. we were crouding full before last night, and we took in 6 strangers and might have accomidated 12 more just as well as not But this is not a priming to the Convention I suppose but if all the Convention people come to stay a fortnight as some have I shall give up.

We are trying as hard as we can to get things put up and get to looking neater. they are painting the old boarding house inside and white washing it out side so there is a new house. I am in the cocoonery to work I like it very well this crop of worms ~~are~~ will be off in about three weeks. and then I am going to reeling I think it will be a very pleasant part to reel, (compared to what it was last summer) as the warter to be heated by steam so no heat will be in the room. Lorenzo Nickerson has come and says he must return this week so that wedding will come off this week. Oh did you ever see such a time Mr Wells has gone to Conneticut to be married. Oh ----- I can not possibly write more of this stuff so I have nothing else to write I may as well stop. All send love to you from your daftur.

Almira