

Baptist Networks in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century U.S.



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Teaching Digital Humanities

Teaching U.S. Women's History with XML/TEI

Since fall 2004, students at Wheaton College have been transcribing women's journals and diaries and encoding them using TEI-compliant XML. Such work gives the students experience with both original sources from the nineteenth century and twenty-first century technologies. They gain a fuller understanding of the levels of mediation between ordinary academic readers and the editions of primary sources to which they usually have access.

A Daughter's Journal and her Father's Career

In fall 2004, students in a U.S. Women's History course worked with the journal of Maria E. Wood, a daughter of a Baptist minister who moved his family from Maine to Illinois in 1868 and thence to Massachusetts in 1874. Subsequent research led to biographical sources about the subject's father, N. Milton Wood. An 1844 graduate of Waterville (now Colby) College, Wood seemed to have used Baptist networks to gain introductions in Washington that led him into the South. These networks appeared to have operated through connections among faculty members at Waterville College and Columbian College (now George Washington University). Wood visited for six weeks at the Louisiana plantation of former Mississippi governor and Congressional Representative Tighman Tucker, and then he became a tutor in Columbus, Mississippi. Wood and Rufus Burleson (the future founder of Baylor University in Waco, Texas) left Columbus to become students at the Western Baptist Theological Institute in Covington, Kentucky.



N. Milton Wood in the United States, 1822-1876.

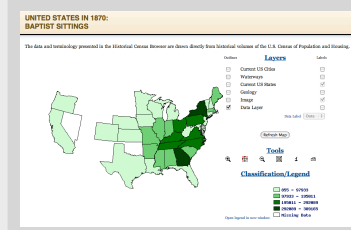
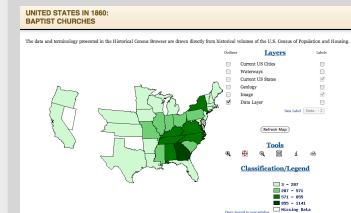
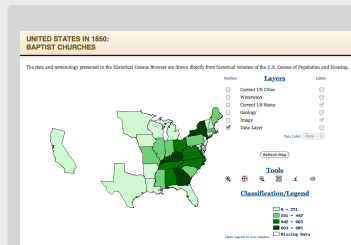
Chronology—N. Milton Wood's Life and Career

- 1822—born in Camden, Maine
- 1840—began college in Waterville, Maine
- 1844—graduated from Waterville College
- traveled to Washington, D.C.
- visited at Cottonwood Plantation in Louisiana
- became a tutor in Columbus, Mississippi
- became a student in Covington, Kentucky
- 1847—returned to Maine
- 1848—began to preach in Bloomfield (now Skowhegan), Maine
- 1852—took pastorate in Waterville, Maine
- 1860—took pastorate in Lewiston, Maine
- 1866—took pastorate in Thomaston, Maine
- 1868—took pastorate in Upper Alton, Illinois
- 1874—returned to New England
- 1874—died in Camden, Maine

Mapping Baptists

Questions and Data

Was it coincidence that the president of the new Western Baptist Theological Institute, Robert E. Pattison, was a former president of Waterville College? Did relationships formed in Covington lead to Wood's later invitation to a pastorate in Upper Alton, Illinois, where Pattison held a chair in systematic theology? The literary sources consulted so far are quite limited. Can the data available through the Historical Census Data Browser at the University of Virginia Library offer any insight? Data on religion and churches was gathered in the 1850, 1860, and 1870 federal censuses. I have considered the 1870 category "sittings" to be roughly equivalent to the 1850 and 1860 "churches." 1860 data under represents the number of Baptist churches as a result of disagreement in data gathering. Numerous subcategories of Baptists—including Free Will Baptists—were counted in 1860, thus perhaps thinning the ranks of those who might have been reported as simply Baptist in other years.

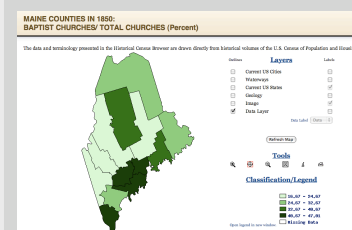
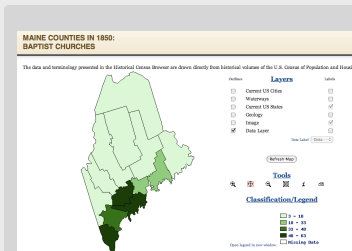


Maine and the Nation

N. Milton Wood and Maine Baptists

As the maps in the previous column illustrate, Maine was not a site of particular strength for Baptists at the national level. It was, however, the state where N. Milton Wood made his name as a minister and theologian. His rise to prominence within the Maine Baptist Convention seems to have resulted from his role in theological disputes that had particularly disruptive effects in Waterville, the site of his second pastorate. In Waterville, Wood confronted the challenge of theological disputes with a more senior minister, David N. Sheldon, who had held the Waterville pastorate when Wood was a student. Sheldon had baptized Wood in 1843. Sheldon had preached a controversial sermon before his colleagues in the Maine Baptist Convention in China in 1844. By the time that Wood returned to Waterville as pastor in January 1852, Sheldon's disputes with his colleagues had been going on for eight years, and his theological distance from Baptist doctrines had become so great that he left not only the pulpit in Waterville but also the presidency of Waterville College.

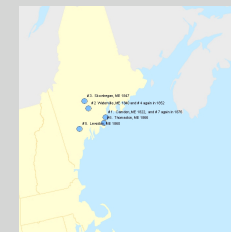
Wood engaged in an extended theological debate with Sheldon that was published in the Portland periodical *Zion's Advocate*. Wood proved himself an able practitioner of the kind of logical argumentation that characterized systematic theology. Wood became president of the Maine Baptist Convention in 1854. He became secretary of the Convention the following year, and in 1857, he became secretary of the Maine Baptist Missionary Society. Wood remained secretary of the Missionary Society for the next ten years. Wood's having studied at WBTI, where R.E. Pattison was president, may have led to his invitation to the pastorate in Upper Alton, Illinois. His skills in systematic theology when Pattison's poor health led him to leave his teaching position at Shurtleff College. Mapping raw numbers of Maine Baptist churches and mapping those churches as a proportion of total churches in the state in 1850 offers some idea of the context in which Wood honed his persuasive skills.



Conclusions

Intersections between Historical Census Data and Microhistory

Much of the digital humanities work that students do in history courses at Wheaton College more closely resembles microhistory than it does the kind of large scale data mining familiar to many practitioners of digital humanities who employ XML/TEI, which was the digital tool through which we first encountered N. Milton Wood. The simple mapping exercises reflected here provide context for better understanding the shape of Wood's career. General knowledge of geography and transportation routes in the mid-nineteenth century might lead the historian to note that both the Western Baptist Theological Institute where Wood studied in the 1840s and Shurtleff College where he taught in the 1870s were in border towns situated across significant routes of water transportation from major cities. Covington, Kentucky, lies across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, and Upper Alton, Illinois, lies across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Maps generated from historical census data demonstrate further possibly significant characteristics of the places where Wood lived, studied and worked. Maine, Mississippi, and Illinois held only moderate numbers of Baptist churches in the mid-nineteenth century. Kentucky, the site of Wood's theological education, was closer to New York and Georgia in the density of Baptist churches at the beginning of the decade when he lived there. Further research manipulating census data at a more granular level could reveal additional details about the textures of Baptist life in the mid-nineteenth century. A more nuanced sense of mid-century Protestantism could well add to further development of the historical literature about regional distinctions, East and West as well as North and South.



N. Milton Wood in Maine, 1822-1876.

References

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