

Number 3

The Baptist Biography Series



# The Diary of John Comer

John Comer

# **THE DIARY OF JOHN COMER.**

# THE DIARY OF JOHN COMER.

EDITED WITH NOTES BY  
**C. EDWIN BARROWS, D. D.,**  
*Late Pastor of First Baptist Church, Newport, R. I.*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND A FEW ADDITIONAL NOTES BY  
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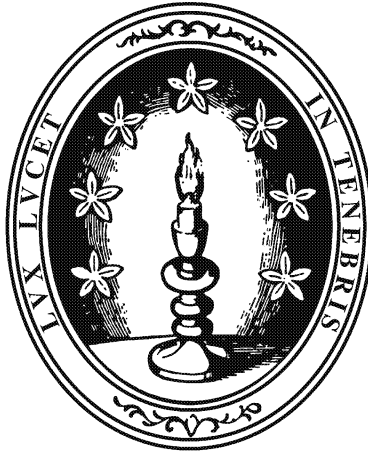
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Thou hast given a *standard* to them that fear thee;  
that it may be displayed because of the truth.  
— *Psalms 60:4*

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**THE WALDENSIAN EMBLEM**

*lux lucet in tenebris*

“The Light Shineth in the Darkness”

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# DEDICATION.

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THE EDITOR

IS PERMITTED TO INSCRIBE THIS VOLUME

TO ONE

WHOSE PRESENCE, DURING HER LIFE, WAS A CONSTANT INSPIRATION  
AND THE MEMORY OF WHOM, NOW THAT SHE HAS  
DEPARTED, SHALL BE A PERPETUAL  
INCENTIVE TO HIGHER  
SERVICE.

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## PREFATORY NOTE.

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THIS work, believed to be of historical interest and value to the general public, to the citizens of Rhode Island, and to the Baptist Denomination, is published by the American Baptist Publication Society in conjunction with the Rhode Island Historical Society, for which it was originally edited and annotated. A portion of the first edition bears the imprint of the latter Society.

The stereotype plates are provided by the generosity of Hon. Horatio Gates Jones, of Philadelphia, and Mr. Samuel A. Crozer, of Upland, Penna.

The autograph of John Comer is given on page 15, and was furnished by the kindness of Hon. H. G. Jones.

For a statement explanatory of the Dedication of this volume, see Introduction, page 12.

It will be understood, of course, that responsibility for opinions expressed in the Notes and Introduction belongs entirely to the writers.

J. W. W.

ROXBOROUGH, PHILADELPHIA, Oct. 15, 1892.





## INTRODUCTION.

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**J**OHAN COMER was born in Boston, Mass., August 1, 1704. He pursued his preparatory studies at Cambridge, with a view of entering Harvard College, where he became a member of a Congregational church; but entered Yale College instead of Harvard in September, 1722. After a time, embracing Baptist sentiments, he was baptized January 31, 1725, becoming a member of the First Baptist Church, in Boston. He did not complete his course at Yale, but after his baptism began to preach. He spent a short time in Swanzey, Mass., teaching school and preaching, and in November, 1725, entered on his ministry in Newport, R. I., at the early age of twenty-one. Here he spent about six years, first as co-pastor of the First Baptist Church with Elder Wm. Peckham, and afterward, as what would probably now be called "stated supply" (in part, for there was another minister,) of the Second Baptist Church. His work at Newport was faithfully done, and was productive of great good; but ere long he found himself beset by many embarrassments. His doctrinal sentiments were Calvinistic, and he soon came to be a firm believer in the practice of "laying on of hands" upon newly baptized believers. The First Church was Calvinistic, but it resisted his attempt to introduce the strict observance of the "laying on of hands." It ought to be remembered that Mr. Comer's opinion was not an idiosyncrasy. Great numbers of Baptists in the seventeenth century, probably the large majority of them, believed this usage to be scriptural and obligatory. The same view was widely held in the eighteenth century. Mr. Comer's resignation resulted from this controversy. With the Second Church he was in harmony on this point; but they were Arminians in doctrine, and did not relish the preaching of the "doctrines of grace." All these difficulties, during which Mr. Comer seems to have exhibited a firm regard for what he believed to be the truth, tempered by a kind and Christian spirit, are set forth in his Diary. Isaac Backus describes him as "an excellent preacher of the gospel," and says that he was 'an eminent instrument of reviving doctrinal and practical religion

in Newport." In 1731 he removed to Rehoboth, Mass. A Baptist church was formed there which was in accord with his views of truth and order, and in less than two years it increased to a membership of ninety-five. While in Newport he had occasionally done missionary work; now he labored not only at home but in Sutton, Leicester, Middleborough, and other places. A bright future seemed to be before him. His ability, piety, and wisdom marked him out for high usefulness and leadership among the New England Baptists, who were then a "feeble folk," struggling with opposition and persecution. But in his zeal he taxed his physical powers too severely, contracted consumption, and "died joyfully" at Rehoboth, May 23, 1734, when not yet quite thirty years of age.

His DIARY, covering the greater part of his life, is of an antique pattern. He often jots down occurrences in the fewest possible words. He deals little with the pictorial and picturesque elements. He reveals himself as a man of thought, of decision, and of piety; but his expressions often appear to us quaint; his reflections, always pervaded by a devout spirit, seem occasionally childlike, especially in the religious awe awakened by every unusual phenomenon or striking event. It was the way of the times to regard every calamity as a judgment, and to look upon many natural phenomena with fear, as portents of wrath, rather than with scientific inquiry and with admiration of God's wonderful displays of his power. This was no doubt an error. Yet who shall say that John Comer was not right in his unquestioning belief in God's providential control of the world, and that his mental attitude was not far nearer the right than the less believing and more flippant temper of this generation? Surely, we may learn something of wisdom and reverence from men like him, even if their quaintness and simplicity sometimes create a smile. When too, we consider the youth of the writer, I think we shall be impressed with the feeling that he was a man of strong intellect and noble powers, and that only his early death prevented him from becoming a commanding figure in the history of his people and in the literature of his day.

As we read this old-fashioned Diary we are carried back to days that, in some respects, seem to belong to remote antiquity. For, two hundred years ago there was not a railroad or steamboat or telegraph or telephone in the world. Men traveled and communicated with each other in the most primitive ways. This country was new, sparsely settled, undeveloped, and bound by ties of political and commercial dependence to the mother country beyond the sea, to cross which was a far more formidable undertaking than it is now to circumnavigate

the globe. Life flowed on in a moderate current, with a slowness which to us would perhaps be intolerable. Questions of public policy, of international relations, of theological thought were all widely different in form, if not in substance, from those that agitate our minds. Many truths and facts, especially of science, now familiar as the alphabet, were then wholly unknown; and many old beliefs and superstitions, now vanished, held full sway or lingered in many minds. Projects now successfully accomplished or hopefully entertained, would then have seemed the wildest vagaries; and some matters then of grave concern, would now have no interest. Was this life, therefore, radically different from ours? Do its simple and quaint annals possess no charm for us and convey no lessons for our instruction? Whoever attentively reads this Diary will experience, first, an impression of freshness and strangeness, as if he had had a glimpse of a world almost unknown. But, presently, he will see the unchangeable elements and principles of human nature and of God's grace at work in that simple state of society. He will perceive that piety, bravery, truth, and honor have all times as their own; and he will not refuse to receive some precious lessons from the Diary of honest John Comer.

Certainly, historically considered, this Diary, which is often quoted by Backus and others, is valuable. The church historian, desirous of understanding the doctrines and practices of that early day, and of rescuing from oblivion a multitude of interesting and instructive facts, will find in it much material. The secular historian, especially in the line of local history, will also find here memoranda of events, accounts of curious circumstances, details concerning men and things, which will aid him in his researches, and throw a good deal of light upon the conditions of life and of thought almost two hundred years ago. Every citizen of Rhode Island interested in the early history of his State, every scholar of antiquarian tastes, every Baptist reverencing his ecclesiastical forefathers and wishing to know more of their beliefs, practices, and lives, every Christian, of whatever denomination, to whom American church history seems as important as the church history of former ages—all these, I am sure, will read with great pleasure and profit the "Diary of John Comer," will be glad to find it elucidated by the scholarly and helpful notes which accompany the text, and will be grateful for the publication of the work.

The task of editing and annotating the "Diary of John Comer" was wisely committed, some years ago, by the Rhode Island Historical Society to the Rev. Dr. Barrows, then Pastor of the First Baptist Church, of Newport. He had already made a profound study of the ecclesiastical history of Rhode Island. He had resided for many years

at Newport, was familiar with its localities, its history, and its traditions, and was pastor of the ancient church to which John Comer ministered. He brought to his work ample ability, habits of diligent and painstaking research, and a remarkably well-balanced and trained power of historical judgment. He had advanced far toward its completion when his labors were terminated by his unexpected and lamented death.

The manuscript notes and memoranda which he left were placed in my hands to prepare the work for the press. I found the great body of the notes in a state of admirable readiness. It was necessary only to look them over with a view to the correction of clerical errors, and these were very few indeed. Two or three notes I have been able to furnish from the author's memoranda in pencil. In quite a number of cases he had indicated his purpose to make other notes, of which no trace could be found. He had undoubtedly passed them, intending later to supply the deficiency—probably, after farther research. These I have not been able to prepare, being without access to the requisite authorities. My own additions are indicated by my initials.

It is a matter of great regret that the editor was prevented by death from finishing his work, especially because in the final form, which it would have received at his hands, it would, I think, have furnished additional light on some interesting subjects. For example: it is well known that a friendly rivalry exists between the First Baptist Church of Providence and the First Baptist Church at Newport, for the honor of being acknowledged as the oldest existing Baptist church in America. Dr. Barrows, in a very gracious and historical spirit, was an advocate of the claim of the First Church at Newport, having a firm conviction of its validity, and being well acquainted with the facts and authorities on which that claim is based. A note indicated but not written might (I conjecture) have thrown some light upon this question. I am sure that the friends of both churches, and all who are interested in historical researches, will regret that Dr. Barrows was prevented from saying whatever he may have desired to say upon this matter of historical fact. Again, I am almost sure that some fuller notice of the life, work, and character of that great and good man, John Clarke, would have been found in these notes if the author had been permitted to prepare them for the press. It is known that he had under advisement the project of preparing a life of John Clarke; a work which would have been of great value, and for which he had every qualification. Also, it is natural to suppose, that the editor would not have failed to give fuller details of the last days and labors of John Comer than I have been able to supply, and that he would have given some account of his posterity. A son, named also John Comer, was—according to

Morgan Edwards and Backus—a member of the Baptist church in Warren, R. I. This and much more would, I presume, have been traced out and recorded. But God has willed otherwise, and we bow with submission to his will, thankful that the careful and scholarly method of Dr. Barrows enables us to rescue from loss and give to the public such a large and valuable portion of what he had intended to contribute to history. It only remains to give a brief notice of his life and character, and to pay a brief tribute to his memory.

COMFORT EDWIN BARROWS was born in Attleboro, Mass., December 11, 1831; was baptized at Providence, R. I., by S. W. Field, D.D., May 25, 1850, becoming a member of the Central Baptist Church (Old "Pine Street"); was graduated from Brown University in 1858, and from the Theological Institution at Newton in 1861. He was almost immediately settled as pastor of the Baptist church at South Danvers (now Peabody), Mass., where he was ordained December 25, 1861. He removed to Newport, R. I., in 1865, settling as pastor with the First Baptist Church, and remaining in that relation almost nineteen years and until his death, which occurred, after a brief illness, December 26, 1883.

He gave his whole heart to his work. He was a faithful pastor, an instructive and thoroughly biblical preacher, a wise administrator, and a diligent student. He made large acquirements in biblical and theological learning. He had a special fondness for the study of philosophy, Christian doctrine, and church history. His personal character was marked by spotless integrity and purity, deep and spiritual piety, and manly firmness, and was adorned by courtesy, sympathy, and gentleness.

Such a man's work could not be circumscribed by "parish limits." He was known in Newport not only as a chief factor in the religious life of the town, but also as a respected and influential citizen, interested in all benevolent and literary projects. He rose to a high position in his denomination. He not only wrote an able and valuable historical sketch of "The Development of Baptist Principles in Rhode Island"<sup>1</sup>—as well as other small works—but in many ways he helped to *make* history. He had positive convictions concerning Christian doctrine and church order, based upon his study of the Bible—the one authority which he reverently accepted as final and infallible. These convictions made him a regular Baptist of the American type, and circumstances made him a special champion of certain essential features of Baptist doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> One of the publications of the American Baptist Publication Society.

and practice. By no means disposed to contention, or even to controversy, with a mind of judicial temper, he never shrank from the path of duty. He knew how to promote and defend what he believed to be the cause of truth and of Christ himself, with patient persistence and with vigilance, firmness, and wisdom. He knew also how to act this important part without rashness or bitterness in a broad and moderate spirit, without compromise and yet with abounding charity to all, "speaking the truth in love." He was, therefore, by the grace of God, equal to every emergency, and his influence continually grew. The fruits of his labors and of his leadership remain his noblest monument.

He was frequently called to positions of honor and trust. He was twice chosen President of the Rhode Island Baptist State Convention; was elected trustee of Brown University in 1878, and was, for one term at least, on the Board of Managers of the American Baptist Missionary Union. He received the honorary degree of Doctor in Divinity from Colby University, in 1881.

It will surprise no one who reads his notes in this volume, to know that in the necrology of his *alma mater* it is said of him that "he had a true historic spirit, which became stronger and more active by investigations and writings, which were characterized by thoroughness and accuracy, by candor and a singleness of devotion to the pursuit and attainment of truth."

The worth of Dr. Barrows was fully known, however, only in the daily walks of pastoral duty and in the sacred enclosure of his home. He was married January 1, 1862. His wife was Harriet Willmarth, the eldest daughter of the Rev. Erastus Willard, for more than twenty years Baptist missionary in France. Mrs. Barrows was a woman of high mental and social endowments, and "the heart of her husband safely trusted in her."

Her death, March 13, 1883, was a crushing blow to him, and at first it seemed that he would never rally from it. At length, however, he had risen above the first stunning shock of his great affliction, and had girded himself to return to "life and to duty with undismayed heart." The touching dedication of this volume to the memory of the departed wife, shows at once the depth of his undying affection and his brave resolve, inspired by her memory, to devote himself to "higher service" for God and for mankind. This dedication I regard as a precious souvenir of them both. I found it, in pencil, among the notes and memoranda, and it is given *verbatim* as its author left it. Its last words seem almost prophetic. The providence of God has removed him from all earthly endeavor, and his aspiration for "higher service" in this life must remain unfulfilled; but all who knew him and loved him will take

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comfort in the assurance that he has only been called to a *higher service*, indeed, in a more perfect life.

The *Comer* of the olden time, with his simple faith and quaint ways, the *Barrows* of the later time, with his riper culture and wider knowledge, but with equal faith in God and in his Holy Word—both faithful workmen in the same vineyard; both true servants of the same Master; both worthy successors of John Clarke; both having hearts loyal to God and sturdy in obedience to him and the defense of his truth; both loving and lovable in the daily walks of life; both called to “higher service” in the midst of their usefulness and promise—in this volume clasp hands across the generations, and being dead, yet speak.

JAMES W. WILLMARTH.

ROXBOROUGH, PHILADELPHIA, Oct. 15, 1892.

*Remember the former things of old, for I am God and there is none else.—Isa. 46 : 9.*

*And thou shalt remember all the way which Jehovah thy God has led thee.—Deut. 8 : 2.*

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So, on and on, through many an opening door,  
That gladly opens to the key I bring,  
From brightening court to court of Christ, my King,  
Hope-fed, love-fed, I journey evermore.

At last I trust these changing scenes will cease ;  
There is a court I hear where he abides ;  
No door beyond that further glory hides :  
My host at home, all change is changed to peace.

WILLIAM C. WILKINSON.



“Oh, my brethren, what manner of people ought we to be, who as Christian men have succeeded to the heritage of martyrs? who have taken up a cause pleaded by apostolic lips? who have followed upon men of whom the world was not worthy? Our ancestors were made what they were by the grace of God, and the church of God may well glorify God in them. Their sufferings and heroic fortitude, their labors and their dauntless courage have left us under solemn obligations. Shall we be craven sons of heroic sires? Shall we be sluggards and slovenly in a work which they carried out so well? They built with gold, silver, and precious stones, shall we degrade their work by heaping thereon wood, hay, and stubble? I charge you, brethren, take good heed unto your ways by the remembrance of whence you came ... I address myself specially to those who are known as Baptists ... our ancestry as a body of Christian men is not to be despised. Albeit that the name of Anabaptist has been made the football of reproach, because it was wrongfully associated with fanatical opinions, we may rest assured that the more history is understood the more apparent will it be that those who were the most traduced were thus treated because they were before their times; they bore the brunt of battle because they led the van. God forbid that I should induce you to glory in them, and so to wear borrowed laurels. Of all pride I think that to be the most idle which hides its own nakedness beneath the tattered banners of ancestry. I do but dwell for a moment upon our past history to excite you to yet more earnest deeds. Prove ye yourselves to be these men’s sons by doing their deeds, else are ye bastards, and not sons.”

C. H. Spurgeon

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

(London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1875)

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