

Our Free Will Baptist Heritage
Free Will Baptist History from a Buckeye Perspective

As we shared in our last article, Eli Stedman moved from Vermont to Ohio in 1804, and was responsible for the first Free Will Baptist Churches in Ohio. By 1810, Stedman had helped organize both The Old Kyger Free Will Baptist Church in Cheshire, and the Rutland Free Will Baptist Church in nearby Rutland. Elder Stedman continued his good work and other churches were soon formed. In 1814, the Athens Quarterly Meeting was established and soon after that, as churches continued to be added, that conference divided and the Muskingum Quarterly meeting was created. The Free Will Baptist work in Ohio had begun through the efforts of a young man from Vermont who had heeded God's call, and was about to receive a huge boost from a preacher boy from New Hampshire.

John Colby was born in Sandwich, New Hampshire on December 9, 1787. Colby, the son of a Free Will Baptist Deacon, was saved in 1805 during a revival meeting, and very soon after began feeling the tug of God on his heart to preach the Gospel. Years later when he looked back on that early call of God, he said, *"About the first sensible impression which I felt on my mind to preach the Gospel was, that I must go through the southern and western climes; and in particular, that I must visit the people in the state of Ohio."* The thought of leaving friends and family at such an early age was a real struggle for Colby, and he fought God's call for several years. Colby compared his struggle to that of Jonah when he was called to Ninevah. In December of 1808, Colby shared that *"again I felt the impression renewed, to arise, and go to the State of Ohio, and to cry against it; and it seemed as if the Lord said, 'Their wickedness is come up before me.' But like Jonah, I fled from the presence of the Lord."*

John Colby ran from the call to preach, and the call to go to Ohio, for four long years. In 1809, Colby shared that the word of the Lord came to him once again saying, *"Go unto Ohio, that great country, and preach in it the preaching I bid thee."* The young man could run no longer. He announced his call to preach, left home November 14th, 1809, was ordained on November 30th, 1809 in Springfield, Vermont, began preaching his way westward, and on March 21st, 1810, crossed the State line into Ohio. Colby passed through Steubenville, Zanesville, Chillicothe, and Cincinnati, preaching almost every day as he traveled. The young preacher from the country was impressed with the big city of Cincinnati, noting in his journal: *"Cincinnati is a flourishing town considering its age, (not twenty years old) and contains five hundred dwelling houses."* After preaching a Conference in Dayton, Colby spent the night with some Indians, sharing the experience in his journal, he said, *"I tied my horse to a tree, and at bed time the Indians wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay down on the ground. I took my chance among them; wrapped me in my over-coat, put my saddle bags for a pillow, and slept very well. The guns, bows and arrows and tomahawks and knives, were plenty about the wigwam, but I rested securely."* Colby ended up spending two months in Ohio, ventured into Indiana, preached back through Northern Ohio, and headed back east. He preached for several more years in the New England states, but was not in good health. He developed consumption and died just short of his 30th Birthday on November 23rd, 1817.

In the Book, "History of Free Will Baptists," published in 1862, Rev. I.D. Stewart reflected on John Colby's visit to Ohio: "*Colby's journey to Ohio in 1810, apparently unnecessary and chimerical, was doubtless from the Lord. He was never able to explain satisfactorily to others, if, indeed, he could satisfy himself, why he took that long and arduous tour, only as it was in obedience to the call of God...but the providences of God in the subsequent ten years make it all plain to us. Colby was a forerunner to prepare the way of the Lord, and how interesting, to follow him outward and homeward, and observe the churches springing up along his track a few years after.*"

Ten years later, Free Will Baptist Churches and Conferences were found in virtually every spot of Ohio where Colby had preached in. May we as Ohio Free Will Baptists never forget the debt we owe to our modern day John the Baptist, that hero of the faith, John Colby, for his great work in our midst.

*If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for these articles, please contact
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NEWSFLASH – ELI STEDMAN'S GRAVE DISCOVERED – Just before press time I received a call from the Rutland County Clerks office, and was informed that they have confirmed the location of Rev. Eli Stedman's grave. It is located in Rutland Township where he died in 1845. I am excited about this discovery, and hope to visit and have pictures available in the very near future.