

*Written for author newsletter*

*August–December 2022*

*3087 words (total)*

## **The Story of John Gano**

**(five parts)**

### **Part I**

*(499 words)*

Over the next few months, I want to delve into the story of John Gano, one of the American Revolution's unsung heroes. This Baptist preacher and chaplain was a close friend to George Washington, and the troops loved him for his courage and dedication. As we shall see, he also has a silent connection to *Preacher on the Run*.

John Gano came from a family with a history of religious freedom. His grandfather, Francis Ganeaux, was a French Huguenot who fled the Isle of Guernsey and settled in the colony of New York due to religious persecution. By the time John came along in 1727 in Hopewell, New Jersey, the family name had been anglicized to *Gano*. John's father was a Presbyterian, the English equivalent of a Huguenot, but John's mother and grandmother were Baptist. He suffered a serious illness at the age of six, but as he grew up, he intended to be a farmer like his father.

But God had other plans. He gave John a growing interest in spiritual things and brought him to faith in Christ just before the age of twenty. John initially inclined to his father's Presbyterian views, but he struggled with the teaching of infant baptism. After John had long discussions on the subject with a Presbyterian preacher, the preacher finally told him, "Dear young man, if the devil cannot destroy your soul, he will endeavor to destroy your comfort and usefulness; and therefore do not be always doubting in this matter. If you cannot think as I do, think for yourself."

John did think for himself, and, after careful consideration, he went to his father and told him he wanted to be baptized by immersion. His father did not agree, but did not stand in his way. John joined the Baptist church in Hopewell, and soon God gave him a new interest: the call to preach.

Drawn by this call, yet resistant to it, John found himself unable to get away from the burden God had placed on his soul. He studied privately for some time and even attended some classes at Princeton. Then, one morning while he was plowing, John's mind was overwhelmed with an Ezekiel-like message: *Warn the people, or their blood will I require at your hands*. Rain started to fall, but John did not notice. When he finally stopped plowing, he was drenched and his horses were exhausted. He surrendered to the call of God. On a journey to Virginia with two preachers, John preached his first public sermon.

When John returned home, his church called him to account for such disorderly behavior as publicly preaching without ordination. But before the church made a decision about his behavior, they asked him to preach to them. He did, and the gift of God was evident in his preaching. The church at Hopewell

ordained John on May 29, 1754. Not long afterward, he headed south to spread the gospel. Next month, we'll follow him to Virginia and the Carolinas.

## **Part II**

*(750 words)*

Last month (well, actually in May of 1754), John was ordained by the Baptist church at Hopewell, NJ. Not long afterward, he headed south to spread the gospel. Multiple stories are told of his preaching journeys, so I thought I'd share a few with you.

While in Virginia, John lodged in a backcountry settlement and heard someone say, "This man talks like one of the Joneses." He asked who the Joneses were and was told they were a family who did nothing but pray and talk about Jesus Christ. He later said, "I determined to make it my next day's ride and see my own likeness." When he met the family, he found that some of the members had only recently come to Christ, and all were excited about the Lord. Although the father was sick and in great pain, he deeply enjoyed meeting a young man who reminded him that his suffering was a sign of God's love.

John met with quite a different reception in another part of Virginia, however, when he and his preaching companion stopped for the night at a tavern and requested a room as far from the noisy, drunken frontiersmen as possible. The landlord obliged and asked his patrons to quiet down, which, in their somewhat inebriated state, they took as a deep insult. The rowdies stormed to John's room and demanded who he was. John answered, "We are civil travelers, who wish neither to disturb you nor to be disturbed by you." The ringleader of the bunch got in his face, pointed to a particularly burly frontiersman, and said, "There is a man who can whip you or anybody else in the room." To which John is said to have replied, "Very probably, sir, for he looks much more the man than you act, and I daresay that he and the rest of his companions are ashamed of you and your conduct." His boldness evidently shocked the man into silence long enough for John to tell the landlord to "Put that fellow out of the room." John then proceeded to comment on the depravity of human nature and explain how men were originally created not to harm but to help each other. By the time he finished his short speech, the rest of the frontiersmen shook hands with him and wished him a good journey.

John traveled as far south as South Carolina. When he reached Charleston, he preached before a company of men that included the great revival preacher George Whitefield. Not surprisingly, John felt a little intimidated! But God reminded him that he had no one to fear and obey but the Lord.

At this point, the French and Indian War was still in swing, and as John returned through North Carolina, he was warned that he would be arrested as a French spy. (I don't know why. Perhaps his French surname made him suspect, or perhaps he just traveled too much.) Instead of sneaking through the town where his arrest was supposed to take place, he stopped at a public house and asked the landlord if the people would gather for a sermon on a weekday. As it turned out, the building was about to hold a general muster for the county militia, so John sent a message to the colonel in command and asked "if it would be pleasant to him to have a short sermon addressed to the regiment before military duty." Incidentally, the colonel was the man who would have arrested John, and John apparently knew it. The militia gathered, and everyone paid respectful attention to the sermon—except for one man. The

colonel thanked John for the sermon and rebuked the volunteer who hadn't listened, and John went freely on his way.

When he reached the Blue Ridge, a storm made him stop at a settler's house. The man was alarmed and wanted to know if John was a pressmaster, pressing men into military service. John replied that he was. Further alarmed, the man asked if John forced married men into service. John said that he surely did—his master's wages were good, and he wanted the man's wife and children to enlist also. Whereupon he exhorted the man to "volunteer for Christ."

John took three of these preaching journeys, one in 1754 (before he was ordained), one in 1756, and one in 1758. After the last one, he took the pastorate of a church in Rowan County, North Carolina. We'll meet him there next month.

### Part III

(396 words)

Last month, I mentioned that John had finished his three preaching journeys throughout Virginia and the Carolinas and had taken the pastorate of a church in Rowan County, North Carolina.

Now, back in the day, Rowan County was much, much larger than it is now. A group of Baptists from New Jersey had settled near the Yadkin River in what was then known as Jersey Settlement. Jersey Baptist Church still stands, although the building that's there now was built in the 1800s.

John Gano's time at Jersey Settlement is where his story intersects, however briefly, with the events of *Preacher on the Run*. When John came to Jersey Settlement, a farmer by the name of Benjamin Merrill helped him purchase land and build a home. Merrill was an active member of Jersey Baptist Church. A decade later, he would be an active Regulator, and in 1771, he would be arrested and hanged for treason against the British government when Governor Tryon marched against the Regulators. On my church's history trip to North Carolina earlier this year, this was one of the churches we visited. It was sobering to me to visit the site of a church where a Regulator worshipped the Lord in the years before his execution. Benjamin Merrill is mentioned in *Preacher on the Run*:

"All we've heard is, Tryon's on the warpath," Alec said, following Mitchell's lead. "He's been here? Already?"

"He's been at Jersey Settlement the last couple of days," the man said. "Ruined Ben Merrill's place. You know Ben Merrill?"

Mitchell knew Ben Merrill. A good Baptist and an outspoken Regulator. "Not well, but yes."

"They took him prisoner and seized his farm. Tryon's up Reedy Creek way now, heading farther north, I reckon."

John Gano was gone by then, however. He stayed at Jersey Baptist Church only two years, then fled to New York with his family due to Cherokee attacks.

In New York City, John became pastor of the newly formed First Baptist Church. He would stay there for twenty-six years, during which time First Baptist Church became the largest Baptist church in the United States of that era.

But pastoring the First Baptist Church of New York was hardly all John Gano was up to during those years. In New York he would strengthen his friendship with a man he had met years ago in Virginia: George Washington.

#### **Part IV**

*(800 words)*

Last month, I mentioned that John had spent two years in North Carolina, then fled to New York with his family to escape Cherokee attacks.

Technically, John fled to Philadelphia first, but he moved to New York within the year. His church there grew and flourished until the outbreak of the War for Independence. John moved his family to Connecticut for safety and returned to New York City, resolving to stay there until the enemy arrived.

During this time, George Washington was also in New York City as the commander in chief of the American forces. Years before, John Gano had met Washington on preaching trips to Virginia, where a young Washington was working as a surveyor. The two men had become friends. Now in New York, Washington attended services at St. Paul's Chapel, the Anglican church. But each service had an awkward moment for Washington—when the minister read the traditional prayers for the success of King George, Washington quietly remained seated. After the Anglican services ended, Washington would walk up the hill to the First Baptist Church of New York City (now the site of Ground Zero) and listen outside the window as his good friend John Gano preached and prayed for God's blessing on the patriot cause.

John's support of the patriot cause went further than prayer, however. He was one of seven formally commissioned Baptist chaplains in the American forces (many more served as volunteers without commissions). As a chaplain, John was not required to be on the front lines. But in the battle of White Plains, he came consistently under fire, so much so that he was commended by the officers near him. Later, he said, "My station in time of action I knew to be among the surgeons; but in this battle I somehow got in front of the regiment, yet I durst not quit my place for fear of dampening the spirits of the soldiers, or of bringing on me an imputation of cowardice. Rather than do either, I chose to risk my fate." Soldiers who flee to the rear might say they don't know how they got there, but John's situation was quite the opposite!

John was also with Washington's army at the crossing of the Delaware and the battle of Trenton on Christmas Day, 1776. Following this, he became chaplain at Fort Montgomery, near West Point. As usual, however, he did not remain out of the action as chaplains generally did. When the British attacked Fort Montgomery, John watched from the breastworks as they approached, and when the fort was taken, he joined the rest of the American garrison in leaping over the breastworks in the dark and escaping down the cliffs to the river. Despite the loss of the fort, the American defense exacted a heavy

toll from the British attackers. John took a brief furlough in time for the birth of a daughter, then returned to the army, this time as chaplain of General James Clinton's brigade.

Throughout his time as chaplain, John's courage under fire made him a favorite among the troops, even though he never missed an opportunity to quietly rebuke sin or encourage righteousness. One story tells of how, on his way to morning prayer, John passed a group of officers and heard one vociferously taking the Lord's name in vain. "I see you pray early," John remarked to him. Embarrassed, the officer replied, "I beg your pardon, sir." "Oh," John said, "I cannot pardon you; you must carry your case to God."

At General Clinton's orders, John preached a memorial sermon of thanksgiving on July 4, followed immediately by the army's departure to fight the Indian tribes who had joined the British and were attacking the New York frontier. In the midst of all this, John noted, "I must not forget to mention a circumstance particularly pleasing to me. Two or three young soldiers were under great distress of mind concerning their souls, and frequently came to see and converse with me."

The next winter, the army camped near the place where John's family was staying, and he was able to spend much of his time at home. Within the year, the American army trapped Cornwallis at Yorktown. The only reason John Gano was not there was because he had stayed behind with a sick aid at General Clinton's request. When the officer recovered, he and John headed for the front. "In a day or two we set off again, but did not reach the army before the British capitulated," John reported. "However, we partook of the joy with our brethren."

In the midst of the war, during his time as George Washington's personal chaplain, John Gano allegedly participated in an event that is still under debate today. More on that next month, Lord willing!

## **Part V**

*(642 words)*

Last month, I mentioned John's service during the Revolutionary War and his friendship with George Washington, and I also hinted at this month's historical controversy:

Did John Gano baptize George Washington?

The story goes that during the Revolutionary War, George Washington recognized his Anglican christening lacked the biblical symbolism of immersion and the element of personal choice, and he requested that his friend and chaplain, John Gano, baptize him by immersion. Over a hundred years later, members of Gano's family commissioned a painting of this event. It is displayed to this day, along with a sword that family tradition says Washington received as a gift from the Marquis de Lafayette and presented to John Gano at the time of the baptism.

Some historians, on the other hand, point out that John Gano did not mention the event in his own biographical writings, nor did Washington mention it in his. There are also apparent discrepancies in the details of the baptism—names of the river and suggested dates vary.

But then again...the original accounts of Washington's baptism, as reported by Gano's grandchildren in signed affidavits in the late 1800s, don't claim certainty of the date or location, suggesting these details arose later, legend-style, as such details often do. The evidence suggests the baptism took place in the

Hudson River while Gano was with the army at Newburgh (or Newbury). These accounts also indicate that Washington requested the baptism be a quiet, private affair. If that was the case, neither John Gano nor Washington might have recorded the event. Gano's oldest daughter passed the story to her children, saying her father had told it to her. Some say Gano's oldest son, Daniel, was an artillery captain at the time and was one of forty witnesses to the baptism.

Other skeptics note that John Gano belonged to the Philadelphia Baptist Association, which published the view that its members should baptize only those who intended to join Baptist churches, a restriction Washington did not meet. However, we have no evidence that Gano abided by this restriction in the rest of his chaplaincy. His son, Stephen Gano, was also a pastor and became known for baptizing any believer who asked, "without publicity or church action and without any changing of their denominational relations." We also know that although Washington never left the Anglican church, he stopped taking communion there during the Revolutionary War and never participated in Anglican communion again.

In the early 1900s, Baptist preacher Lemuel Barnes published a paper on the subject of Washington's baptism after thirty-five years of research. He arrived at the conclusion that while we will probably never know the official answer to this question, the traditional and circumstantial evidence is strong. The best argument against the tradition is an argument from silence—the absence of written records by any of the participants or witnesses.

After the war, John Gano resumed his pastorate in New York for time, then moved to the Kentucky frontier. He preached there until 1798, when a fall from his horse crippled him. He continued to spread the gospel for the next six years, preaching while lying on his back if necessary. In 1804, as death approached, a friend asked him if he wanted to go home and be with Christ. John Gano's last recorded word is, "Yes."

We may never know the full story of John Gano's ministry to George Washington. If Lemuel Barnes wasn't prepared to make a definitive statement after thirty-five years of research, I'm not going to pretend to have an answer. We can ask Gano and Washington when we get to heaven. Still, the very fact that it's even a traditional and historical possibility indicates the respect Washington had for Gano and his faith—a respect shared by the hundreds of men who served with the "Fighting Chaplain" of the War for Independence.