*Pioneer Preachers of Northwest Alabama, 1.*

**John H. Dale:**

**A Man BAPTIZED BY Barton W. Stone**

When I first began a serious study of Restoration history half a century ago, my Uncle Brisco Kimbrough, told me about an old gospel preacher who lived in Franklin County, Alabama, in the early part of the 20th century. He could not recall his name, or much about him. Chester O. Stout, a long time elder of the church in Russellville, later told me about the same preacher, saying he had preached to the Russellville church in 1925 when he was 103 years old. He said the old man sat in a chair and preached on the conversion of Saul, but Brother Stout also had forgotten his name. I, too, forgot what they told me about the old preacher until I unexpectedly came across his name in the 1960s.

At the time, I was doing research and reading through the bound copies of the old *Franklin County Times* in the basement of the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery. In one of the issues, I saw a reprint of an article from the *Birmingham News* telling about an old Franklin County preacher named John H. Dale. The heading read: “Venerable Gentleman, 104, Has Baptized Eight Thousand.” Thomas H. Roberson, one of the Russellville elders, had sent the item, along with some personal comments, to the county paper. This was also published in the *Gospel Advocate* September 1, 1927. Roberson was apparently the source of the *Birmingham News* story.

An obituary of John H. Dale, written by Van A. Bradley of Phil Campbell, a brother of I.B. Bradley, appeared in the *Gospel Advocate* December 12, 1928. Van Bradley and W.R. Wilcutt of Fulton, Mississippi, preached Dale’s funeral. It was from these records that I wrote an article about John H. Dale entitled, “Five Score Years and Five,” that was first published in *The Sword of Peace* in 1966. It was published in *The Gospel Guardian* in 1968 and in *Searching the Scriptures* in the 1970s. In January 2002, the same article appeared in *With All Boldness* magazine published in Indianapolis. It was also included in a book of vignettes on the Restoration called *Fifteen Miles from Heaven*.

[As an aside, I.B. Bradley is one of several good men who did great pioneering work in Franklin County. He lived in Russellville ten years, 1896-1905, and supported himself as a bookkeeper for Wilson Mercantile Company and as a carpenter. He was one of the most successful evangelists that ever preached in the county. His preaching continued there many years after he moved to Dickson, Tennessee. He started a church three miles southwest of Belgreen in 1896 with 36 persons he baptized there. The church built a meeting house, which they called Bradley’s Chapel in the Bradley’s honor. He held meetings there almost every year for 28 years, at least up to 1924. In 1906, he baptized 28 in a week’s meeting there and in 1907, he baptized 34. Altogether he baptized about 200 people in that back country region. He was also active in the Belgreen church. He held a mission meeting there in 1906 “at his own charges,” and up until 1917 had held 14 meetings there.]

John Dale, a native of Ireland, was born November 24, 1822. He came to America when he was a young man, in about 1840, and settled in Illinois. Although reared in the Roman Catholic Church, he came in contact with Barton W. Stone about the time he came to America and was converted and baptized by him. He was probably about 19 years old at the time. Stone moved to the Prairie State from Kentucky in September 1834 and settled near the little town of Jacksonville, which was described as “hardly more than a crowded village on the outposts of civilized Illinois.” This was the same year that Stephen A. Douglas took up residence in Jacksonville.

After moving to Illinois, Stone continued to make preaching journeys, although age, physical decline, and intermittent illness hindered him. However, in the summer of 1841, when he was 69, he suffered a debilitating paralytic stroke that left him greatly handicapped the rest of his life. He was now limited in preaching and no longer able to make preaching journeys as he had done from the beginning of his ministry. His death came in the river town of Hannibal, Missouri, early on a Saturday morning, November 9, 1844, at the home of Capt. Sam Bowen. Thus, the life of probably the greatest single outside influence for the cause of Christ in North Alabama ended.

Evidently John Dale met Stone and was converted by him before Stone’s severe stroke. The place is unknown, but it most likely was at a point on a preaching tour in Illinois, if not at Jacksonville. No mention of Dale is found in the *Christian Messenger*, which Stone continued publishing with the help of D. Pat Henderson until his death. T.H. Roberson, who met Dale in about 1920, said: “[Dale] soon [after his conversion] became a preacher and traveled extensively…. [I]n the early ‘sixties,’ he visited the Holy Land, and still enjoys recounting his experiences there. His work in the ministry continued for sixty years, during which he baptized more than eight thousand people. A few years ago, however, he felt his strength not equal to the task and resigned. Since then Mr. Dale has been making his home with Ellie L. Reed, in Vina. The Russellville Church of Christ is materially contributing to his welfare.”1

Neither the scope of Dale’s ministry, nor the means of his support are known. It may have been several years after his conversion before he began preaching. This would account for his not being mentioned in Stone’s paper that ceased publication in 1844. His trip to the “Holy Land” in about 1860 was a rare and expensive venture for that time. This may indicate that he had a good income, but the source is unknown. It could hardly have been from preaching. Almost all preachers then had to support themselves and their families by secular employment. Barton W. Stone farmed and taught school for a living. Dale’s excursion to Palestine came nearly twenty years before J.W. McGarvey’s historic journey to that region, which he wrote about in *Lands of the Bible*, published in 1881.

For a long time I wondered why Dale came to Vina, Alabama. There is no indication of any relatives living there. Vina itself was a small station town on the Illinois Central Railroad where some of its workers lived. When the postmaster was searching for short, catchy name for the town that was incorporated in 1907, he named it after the wife of an engineer on the railroad. Vina was in an isolated, backwoods section of the Franklin County. Its population as late as 2000 was only 400 souls, and a bunch of dogs. Furthermore, there was only a handful of Christians at Vina when Dale settled there and they met for worship in an old abandoned potato barn. So it is a mystery as to his reason for coming to this little mountain village in 1913 when he was 91 years old and near the end of his preaching career.

A year or two ago, as I thought about this mystery, weighing different possibilities, it occurred to me that Dale’s coming to Vina might have had some connection with the Illinois Central Railroad. This is the only thing that made sense to me. Vina was a railroad town, on a branch line of the Illinois Central that ran from Jackson, Tennessee, to Birmingham, passing through the southwest corner of Franklin County at Vina. I filed that away in the back roads of my mind as an interesting supposition. Then when I began to prepare some notes for this presentation about John Dale, my conjecture was greatly strengthened when I decided to see if there was any connection between Irish Catholic immigrants to Illinois and the Illinois Central Railroad. I then discovered that many Irish Catholics began arriving in America in the 1840s, but “they started arriving in the 1830s in the wake of the horrible [Irish Potato Famine](http://www.conservapedia.com/Irish_Potato_Famine).” 2

This great emigration of Irish Catholics to America was about the time that young John Dale came to America and came in contact with Barton W. Stone. One document said: “Fleeing a potato famine that first hit Ireland in the 1840s, the Irish and other immigrants came for work, many on the Illinois Central Railroad, then the largest private construction project in U.S. history. The rail line reached Bloomington in 1853, with laborers paid $1.25 per day.”3  That did not prove my guesswork, but it satisfied my curiosity.

Dale’s labors as a gospel preacher covered more than sixty years. In fact, it was not until he was near 95 years of age that he felt his strength was not up to the task and ceased making preaching journeys. However, he preached for a few more years after coming to Franklin County. We have a record of his holding meetings at Berea in Fayette County in 1916 and 1918. Chester R. Estes, gives an account of Dale’s preaching in Prentiss County, Mississippi, a little earlier. He said the Estes family moved from Marion County, Alabama, to a large farm west of Tishomingo, Mississippi, when he was a boy. There were several houses on the farm and Brother and Sister Ellie Reed, who took care of John Dale at Vina near the end of his life, then lived in one of the houses on the Estes’ farm.

Chester Estes, in a biography of his life written in about 1981, wrote a few lines about John Dale, whom he called “Brother Daily.” He said: “In the summer of 1924, while selling barber supplies, books, and preaching throughout the country, I came to Vina, Alabama, and spent some time there with brother and sister Ellie Reed who formerly lived in Prentiss County, Mississippi. At the time of my visit with them brother Daily was living with them. (I do not remember the first name of brother Daily.) [He apparently had also forgotten Dale’s last name.] He was an old pioneer preacher who had been baptized by Barton W. Stone. At the time I visited the Reed home he was a 102 years old. I talked with him all one afternoon.”4

Estes said that some twelve years before, that Dale held a gospel meeting in the Estes’ yard in Mississippi. He preached under some trees and many people heard him. That was in 1912 when Dale was 90 years old and about a year before the old preacher moved to a little house in Vina where he lived alone. So Dale seems to have been preach-ing in Alabama and Mississippi about the time he came to Vina and for several years after moving there.

Dale’s life apparently included many activities, but his main interest was the gospel. In baptizing more than 8,000 people, he accomplished a feat comparable to several of the most successful and well-known pioneer preachers of the nineteenth century. One who baptized thousands of people must have been well known in some parts of the country, but unfortunately for history, it did not included men with access to a printing press. However, it is not unusual to find that there are many men in the Restora-tion Movement who did great work, but left no record of it. H. Leo Boles in writing about pioneer gospel preachers included a few who, he said, were among those “who loved, labored, and died in obscurity.”5 Even as well known and important as Stone was to the movement, William Garrett West says: “It is impossible to trace the later years of Stone’s life, because the source materials are not available.”6

John Dale was married and had two children, but his wife died soon after the War Between the States, and he buried both of his children in their early childhood. So he was alone, so far as family is concerned, when he came to Vina, and lived alone in the town until nearer the end of his life. He also lived in Vina nearly a dozen years before he became known to his brethren in Christ in rest of the county. Even then, he did not become known to the church at Russellville until he was driven there by poverty. In about 1920, with his resources all gone and his physical strength abating, Brother Dale made a trip to the county court house in Russellville to seek admission to the county poorhouse. The poor house was located near Belgreen and the building is yet standing. Some think Dale died there, but this is contrary to what is known of his last days.

It was when he sought admission to the poor house that Dale became known to the Russellville church. T.H. Roberson, a town banker and an elder in the church, was told about Dale’s presence in the county seat and the nature of it. It is most likely that a member of the church of Christ who was the county social worker told Roberson about Dale. He immediately sought out the old preacher, visited with him at length, and learned his life story. The elder told him that a man who had done as much as he had for the cause of righteousness should not spend his last days in the poorhouse.

He made Dale’s plight known to the church in Russellville and it willingly took up his support. With the help of a few individuals and the brethren at Vina, the church clothed, boarded, and otherwise looked after Brother Dale’s needs for the last seven years of his life. Records of the Russellville church for this period show contributions in various amounts for his care. The church’s financial report for the period, which the treasurer and Sunday School Superintendent, Dr. T. Stratton Jones, kept on back pages of the Sunday School Record, shows that $22.50 was paid monthly to Ellie L. Reed of Vina with whom Dale lived. Earlier $20.00 was paid monthly directly to “Jno. Dale.” There are also interesting items, such as an entry to Dearing Orman Company, for “clothing [for] Bro. Dale,” and a $2.50 item for a pair of eyeglasses.7 During this time, notwithstanding his great age, the old preacher’s mind remained active and he retained a bit of Irish wit in his conversation until the end. He died December 10, 1927 and was buried near the place where he spent the last fourteen years of his life.

Of the hundreds of articles I have written on Restoration history, none has given me more genuine satisfaction than the serendipitous story of John H. Dale. This is not alone because of the story itself, including his intimate association with Barton W. Stone, but because of the subsequent story of how this long forgotten preacher came to be remembered, and especially for the part I had in resurrecting his memory. Scott Harp, a preacher then living in Fayetteville, Georgia, read the article I wrote about Brother Dale, that appeared in *With All Boldness* magazine. Scott later wrote about this, saying: “I came across an issue of With All Boldness in 2002 and noted the article by Earl Kimbrough on the life of John Dale. I had never heard of Dale, but it peaked [sic] my interest because my home of Haleyville, Alabama is only about 40 miles from Vina where Dale had lived. Another thing that caused my interest to peak was that one of the elders of the Fayetteville Church of Christ where I preach grew up in Vina, Alabama, [his name is] James Rickard.”8

Harp continued: “I called James to ask if he had heard of the old preacher. The response was that he remembered him, and that he had not heard that name in seventy years. He began investigating the location of the grave of Dale, along with any other information he could find. He contacted public records departments in Alabama, Kentucky and Illinois where he came across just a little information ... He ordered a copy of Dale’s death certificate [from the State of Alabama] and saw that his own father, Nello Rickard, had signed it. This made this an even more personal connection for James to the old man of God.”9

Brother Rickard wrote a brief sketch of John Dale in which he said: “I grew up in the little town of Vina. I was 7 years old when this great man, whom I remember as ‘Old Brother Dale’ died. My father, Nello Rickard, completed and filed his death certificate. I remember this grand old man who had a long, gray beard. Even though I was a child when I knew him, I consider it a distinct honor to have known such a great man who was baptized by Barton W. Stone, one of the very great giants of the Restoration Movement. It isn’t likely that there are many other people living today who can claim such a distinct honor by saying that they personally knew someone who was baptized by Barton Stone.”10

I have corresponded, talked by phone, and visited with Brother Rickard in Fayetteville. He sent me copies of all the information he had gathered about John Dale, including his death certificate. Unfortunately, at the end of 2003, Brother Rickard’s wife Francis died and he, quite naturally, had to make painful adjustments in his life. But as soon as he was able, he resumed his interest in John Dale. He learned that he was buried in an unmarked grave in Old Burleson Cemetery near Vina in Franklin County. With the help of Brother Rickard’s daughter, and at their expense, he ordered the erection of an appropriate stone monument in memory of his boyhood friend. He had this placed, he said, “at a wonderful location near the entrance drive” up the hill in the old cemetery. James also sent me pictures of the cemetery where the old pioneer is buried and of the monument he had erected there. I have since visited the cemetery and have seen the now historic memorial.

Brother Harp has added the story of John H. Dale (including my article on Brother Dale and a paper I sent him from my personal notes) to his very valuable web site of deceased gospel preachers (www.therestorationmovement.com). This together with the erection of the beautiful stone monument that Brother Rickard set up in Brother Dale’s memory in Old Burleson Cemetery, the article about the old preacher that appeared in four periodicals, and a chapter about him in *Fifteen Miles from Heaven*, plus another article I wrote about “Remembering Brother Dale,” and mention of him in a sketch on the church at Vina in *The Restoration Movement in Russell’s Valley*, give some assurance that Brother John H. Dale will not again be forgotten. Natives of Franklin County can take some pride in knowing that a 105 year old gospel preacher who was baptized by Barton W. Stone some 170 years ago, is buried about ten miles from were we are today.

The *Birmingham News* article serendipitously discovered in an old musty copy of the *Franklin County Times*, the article by Brother Roberson, and the obituary by Van Bradley in the *Gospel Advocate* prompted the article about John Dale. It was the fourth publication of the article about the old preacher that came to the attention of Scott Harp, which in turn awakened the boyhood memory of James Rickard that had lain dormant for three quarters of a century, and resulted in his placing a beautiful monument about Brother Dale’s life in Old Burleson Cemetery.

The memorial reads: “John Dale. Nov. 13, 1822. Dec. 10, 1927. In this cemetery the body of John H. Dale lies in an unidentified grave. Born in Ireland, he came to America as a young man, where he met and was baptized by Barton W. Stone. He was a member of the Church of Christ and as a gospel preacher baptized about 8,000 people during his life. He lived his last few years in Vina, Alabama.”11

I share with Brother Harp the sentiment he expressed in saying: “The outcome of this is that I know a man who knew a person baptized by Barton W. Stone. I say this is very unique.” Several in my father’s family and members of the Russellville church then living whom I knew also knew Brother Dale and heard him preach in 1925. I would only add to the uniqueness of this remarkable chain of events the thought that this may very well have been providential. I am both grateful to God and personally pleased with the part I had in renewing the memory of John H. Dale, who was a living link in my own lifetime to Barton W. Stone. This was at a time when the old preacher had been forgotten even by some who had known him. I last saw Scott Harp and James Rickard at the Friends of the Restoration meeting at Faulkner University in Montgomery, last March, and thanked them again for what they have done to memorialize one of three great pioneer preachers whose remains rest in the soil of Franklin County. The others are John Taylor and John T. Underwood. I might add the Brother Underwood was a student of T.B. Larimore and a long time Alabama and Mississippi preacher. Incidentally, he was married by Dr. A.C. Henry, another pioneer preacher who labored in this county, at Belgreen in about 1896. Underwood is buried on Spruce Pine Mountain about eight miles south of Russellville and John Taylor in the Taylor cemetery about three miles north of here.

In his remarks about Brother Dale, James Rickard thoughtfully said: “As New Testament Christians living in 2004 we should consider these questions: Were it not for such spiritual giants as Barton Stone, Alexander Campbell, John Dale, and many others, what would be our spiritual relationship with God today? Would the New Testament church in all its primitive splendor and glory exist in our great country today? Would there be a congregation of the Lord's people in the communities where we live today? Just think of the untold thousands of men and women who obeyed the gospel and whose souls are in paradise today because these great men worked so hard and sacrificed so much in restoring the church to what it was in New Testament times. Today, we are ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ because of the efforts of these men. Truly, we owe them a great debt of gratitude. May the memory of these great men live on and on in the hearts and minds of New Testament Christians.”12

**Notes**

1 *Gospel Advocate*, Sept. 1, 1927.

2.www.conservapedia.com.

3 [www.Pantagram.com](http://www.Pantagram.com/).

4 Chester Estes, *Faith that Overcomes*.

5 H. Leo Boles, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers.*

6 William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone*.

7 Sunday School Record, Russellville, Ala., Church of Christ, 1925.

8 Scott Harp, [www.TheRestorationMovement.com](http://www.TheRestorationMovement.com/).

9 Ibid.

10 James Rickard, Ibid.

11 Memorial to John H. Dale, Old Burleson Cemetery, Franklin County, Alabama.

12 James Rickard, TheRestorationMovement.com.