

Bottskill Baptist Church History Minute

Church Historian Ken Perry

August 2026- Elder Nathan Tanner



Portrait of Elder Tanner by Artist Ken Perry

Who was Elder Nathan Tanner, the first pastor of this church, where did he come from, what became of him and was there more than one reason that brought about his fall into disrepute?

He served here from 1782 to 1793, but from a letter written by him in August 1800, began gathering the church in 1767 and raised its membership to about 200 before he left.

Part of his story was first told in Elisha P. Thurston's history of Greenwich, published in 1876, its contents reintroduced in 1966 by a Hearsay and History article that appeared in The Greenwich Journal, and Rev. Lewis Powell used his name as the heading of a newsletter he created in 1949.

In the first census, he appears on a page next to Thomas Tanner, who later proves to be one of his sons. Other church members appearing in the early records are highlighted here. John Reynolds, who appears at the bottom, was the individual tasked with obtaining a grant of land for the site of the first church.

Above him, in orange, is Elisha Bentley, the deacon who brought charges against Elder Tanner. About 1793, when the second church was being built, Elisha raised his homestead roughly two miles from the church on Co. Rt. 52, between the Meader and Spraguetown roads, now owned by Mrs. Emily VanDriel. His grave is found in the backyard, along with his daughter, Tabitha Tanner, the wife of John Tanner. She gave birth to Elisha Bentley Tanner in March, and 17 days later, April 9, 1801, passed away, her son being raised by other family members.

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Berg. M. Mancher	1	1	2
Allen Turner	1	1	4
Moses Puse	1	1	1
Thomas Tuttle	1	1	2
Henry Tuttle	2	2	4
Nathan Tanner	1	1	2
Thomas Tanner	1	1	1
Barner Rose	3	2	4
Constant Pette	1	1	3
William DeWitt	3	1	2
David Cutler	3	3	3
Samuel Kinson	2	2	4
David Tiff	2	1	3
Phineas Kington	1	2	2
David Green	1	2	3
James Rogers	1	3	7
Joseph Burke	1	1	3
Jonathan Butler	1	2	1
Berg. M. Ry	2	4	3
Samuel Rogers	1	1	2
Thomas Gilbert	1	2	1
Berg. M. Sage	3	1	3
Elisha Bentley	1	1	6
John Rogers	1	1	1
Samuel Pette	1	1	2
Oliver Rogers	2	1	1
Nathan Thompson	1	2	2
John Prynor	2	1	2
Charles Turner	1	1	1
Nathan Mantel	1	1	3
Peter Thompson	2	3	4
James Thompson	3	4	2
Isaac Jones	1	2	3
Henry Thompson	2	3	5
William Clark	1	2	2
W. L.	1	1	2

1790 census

There was only four other Tanner graves found in Greenwich cemetery records, none of them connected to Nathan Tanner. So, what became of his family, as he was reputed to have had a large one? That will be explored later.

Meanwhile, the charges against Elder Tanner were entered Aug. 17, 1793, by Deacon Elisha Bentley and James Coon.

At a Conference meeting a week later, Aug. 23, two of the four were addressed. The first, and what is commonly understood to be the reason for Elder Tanner's dismissal, was for digging for money supposedly hidden by "Berguines men." This was common lore among the early settlers, and Elder Tanner did not see his efforts as unusual, but apparently Deacon Bentley took umbrage against it as appearing unseemly for a pastor to be doing this.

According to Tom Ruffalo, Washington County Historian, it was unlikely they would have buried any gold in the area, as Burgoyne intended to retreat to Ticonderoga and thus, to Canada, unaware that he had been encircled. The hard money that they were carrying with them was for paying

their Hessian mercenaries and for any services supplied by area settlers as they foraged along the route to Albany.



Deacon Bentley's Greenwich, NY homestead shown in this current (2026) photo

At a Conference Meeting held August ye 17th 1793
 first opened the Meeting by Singing & prayer to God
 1 Chose brother Elijah Case Moderator and brother
 2 Abinzer Eason Clerk for the Day
 3 Deac Bentley & br James Coon brought in as a
 Complaint in writing (Viz) four Charges against
 Eldr Tanner which was Laid before the Church

At a Conference Meeting held August ye 17th 1793
 first opened the Meeting by Singing & prayer to God
 Chose brother Elijah Case Moderator and brother Abinzer Eason
 Clark for the Day
 Deac Bentley & br James Coon brought in as a Complaint in
 Writing (Viz) four charges against Eldr Tanner which was Laid before
 the Church

August ye 23rd Met according to adjournment
 first opened the Meeting by Singing & prayer to God
 1 firstly Queried by the Elder whether upon Examination
 if any one fall in Debt and Stands Ready
 to pay part whether it shall be Received as so
 2 much paid of the Debt
 2 Answered by the Church to Give Credit for all
 that is paid
 3 Call Deac Bentleys first Charge in Question which
 was for his Portending to Dig in the Earth for Money
 4 Eldr Tanner Makes this plea that he was
 Informed and tells how he was Informed that there
 was Money hid there by Berguines Men and that he
 Believed it and that he Concluded that under his
 Poverty or Necessity it was not any harm for
 him nor no other man to take it up or to find
 it and to make use of it and upon that Consideration
 he tryed to find it but to no purpose
 and as I understand it has Grieved a Number
 of my Brethren for which I am Verry Sorry
 that Ever I tryed for to Dig for the money
 in the order I Did if it was to Do again I
 should Not Do it So that I hope my brethren
 may forgive me and over Look my fault

August ye 23rd Met according to adjournment
 first opened the Meeting by Singing & prayer to God
 firstly Queried by the Elder whether upon Examination if any one
 fall in Debt to say only and Stands Ready to pay part whether it shall
 be Received as so much paid of the Debt
 2 Answered by the Church to Give Credit for all that is paid
 3 Call Deac Bentleys first Charge against Eldr in Question which
 was for his Portending to Dig in the Earth for Money
 4 Eldr Tanner Makes this plea that he was Informed and tells how he
 was Informed that there was Money hid there by Berguines Men and
 that he Believed it and that he concluded that under his Poverty or
 Necessity it was not any harm for him nor no other man to take it up
 or to find it and to make use of it and upon that Consideration he
 tryed to find it but to no purpose and as I understand it has Grieved a
 Number of my Brethren for which I am Verry Sorry that Ever I tried
 for to Dig for the Money in the order I Did if it was to Do again
 I Should Not Do it So that I hope my brethren may forgive me and
 overlook my fault

Elder Tanner explained that anyone might be at liberty to search for this gold and he did so in his "Poverty and Necessity," not aware that other church members were "Grieved" by his doing so, and so he pledged not to continue. He then said "I hope my brethren may forgive me and over Look my fault." It was then asked if this satisfied the "Bretherens Minds" on "how much of the Debt was paid" by him and they concurred, except for the two deacons.

The second charge addressed that day was that he and his wife were living separately without sufficient reason. To this, he “Utterly Denyeth,” explaining that he lost the lease to his house and farm and was unable to obtain another. He and his wife then decided to live in the separate households of two married daughters.

Here is a pearl of information, because it provides approximate dates for when he and his wife were born, married, and had children who were now married. This would suggest that Elder Tanner and his wife were probably born in the 1730s or 1740s, and that their children were probably born in the 1760s or 1770s, which now gives us a place and time period to look for their origins. Unfortunately, he did not disclose their married names, but we did have a visitor here in June who could provide one.

When Ron W. Germaine visited here, he came as a direct descendant of James Germain, who married Elder Tanner’s daughter, Elizabeth, on January 2, 1782, when she was just 15 years old, i. e., born in 1767, which provided further information for discovering the Tanner ancestry.

When asked whether this charge should be considered “just or Not,” it was decided “by Vote of the Majority unjust.”

The other two charges were made the following week, Aug. 29, one of them related to the first charge, the using of a “Mineral Rod to search for Money or mines or hid treasures.” A mineral rod, in the 18th century, probably resembled one of these, and was similar to something used to dowse for water. Basically, it was a primitive type of metal detector. To that, Elder Tanner said he saw no “Evil” in using it, as any tool a tradesman might use. Asked if its use was “Lawfull or Expedient,” the congregation agreed that it might be lawful but wasn’t expedient in his case. Perhaps they thought that its use was a form of divination or witchcraft.

The last charge involved his circulating reports that he and his wife had a “Fowl” disease, on which he replied that he was concerned about the possibility of having some malady and mentioned it to others, but did not spread the information. To this, those eligible to vote on the matter split, seven favoring him and eight dissenting. They did not, in this instance, charge him with any evil.

By this time it became evident to the church members that they were unable to determine if Elder Tanner’s awkward or embarrassing behaviors merited censure. A Conference meeting on Sept. 14, 1793, decided to call several sister churches together to weigh what had so far been presented and report their feelings on Elder Tanner’s case.

The Council involved the ruling elders from eight churches amongst the Shaftsbury Baptist Association, founded 1780, which Bottskill was then a part of, some of those called being the churches in Stillwater, Greenfield, Hartford and in Vermont, Pownal and Shaftsbury. They were called to convene on Sept. 25, and its report was read on Oct. 19. Elder Tanner replied to it with “a Long Epistle.” He was then questioned and it was considered whether his “Confession” had paid “the Debt” for the charges against him. “The Voices of the Majority” said that he had not paid in full, and it was concluded that he not preach “until he was Viseably Restored.”

{94} *AGAINST* his Principle and is yet tho I have been
 tempted to Doe the Like I hope I never may Do the
 Like again this Meeting is Refaird to our Next Conference
 At a Conference Meeting held October ye 19th 1793
 1st opened the Meeting by Singing & pray to God
 2^d appointed brother Elijah Case Moderator for the Day
 3^d proceeded to business and Calld the Brethrens Minds who
 Received the Result of Council & who Did Not Receive
 and there was fourteen Male Brethren Received the
 Result and there was Eight Male Brethren Did not
 Receive the Result & there was five females Received
 and five Received it Not so that the Majority
 of the Church Received the Result of Council —
 4th Red the Result of the Council in Publick
 5th then Eldr Tanner Reads a Long Epistle of his
 mind in answer to the Result and to shew how
 much of the Result he means to Confess —
 6th there was a Number of Questions asked the Elder
 7th to which he gave answer to them
 8th took the minds of the Brethren to Know how many
 the Elders Confession had paid the Debt too
 9th the Voice of the Majority was Not paid in full
 and Not for him to preach untill he was
 Visably Restored
 10th this Meeting is adjourned untill this Day two weeks
 at one o'clock of the Day in order to send for Council

At a Conference Meeting held October ye 19th AD 1793
 first opened the Meeting by Singing & pray to God
 2ly appointed brother Elijah Case Moderator for the Day
 3ly Proceeded to business and Calld the Bretherens Minds who
 Received the Result of Council & who Did Not Receive and there
 was fourteen Male Bretheren Received the Result and there was
 Eight Male Bretheren Did Not Receive the Result & there was five
 females Received and five Received it Not so that the Majority of
 the Church Received the Result of the Council
 4ly Red the Result of the Council in Publick
 5ly then Eldr Tanner Reads a Long Epistle of his mind in answer
 to the Result and to Shew how much of the Result he means to Confess
 6ly there was a Number of Questions asked the Elder to which he gave
 an answer to them
 7ly took the minds of the Bretheren to Know how many the Elders
 Confession has paid the Debt too & the Voice of the Majority Was
 Not paid in full and Not for him to preach until he was Visably
 Restored

Here is where one of Elder Tanner's character flaws was revealed. On November 17, with Caleb Blood, ruling elder of the 4th Baptist Church of Shaftsbury, serving as Moderator. Questions were voted upon to address the Council a second time. Out of the four questions, two involved whether or not Elder Tanner had given "Gospel Satisfaction" in light of the crime he had been found guilty of on Sept. 25 and if he had shown "true Repentence." The other two

concerned if it were a "breach of Gospel Rule" for him to preach without being properly restored to fellowship and if those who received his preaching "be held as a bar" to remaining members.

The results of these queries were received on Dec. 19, 1793, and it was voted to withdraw Elder Tanner from fellowship as "a Disorderly Walker in Israel" and to ban or withdraw all those members who had supported his preaching during the interim.

Records are silent on the contents of these reports or Elder Tanner's replies or as to who the withdrawn members were, but it is likely that if they did not go elsewhere, the banished members may have returned to the church at a later date during Elder Edward Barber's ministry by giving evidence of having made a full repentance for their previous error.

on the 19th of December
 At a Conference Meeting held December 19th 1793
 first opened the Meeting by singing & prayer to God
 2ly Chose brother Elijah Case Moderator for the Day
 and proceeded to business and Calld on the brethren
 to know whether they Received the Result of Council
 or not and they Cordely agreed to Receive the last
 Result of Council on there Labour with Eldr
 Tanner Some Making a Referee on the Answer
 to the Second Question Laid before the Council
 4ly Calld a Vote of the Brethren to Know whether they
 was Ready to with Draw their fellowship from
 Eldr Tanner as a Disorderly walker in Israel

At a Conference Meeting held December ye 19th AD 1793
 first opened the Meeting by Singing & prayer to God
 2ly Chose brother Elijah Case Moderator for the Day and proceeded
 to business and Calld on the brethren to Know whether they Received
 the last Result of Council or not and they Cordely agreed to Receive the
 Last Result of Council on there Labour with Eldr Tanner Some Making
 a Referee on the answer to the Second Question Laid before the Council
 4ly Calld a Vote of the Brethren to Know whether they was Ready to
 with Draw their fellowship from Eldr Tanner as a Disorderly Walker in Israel

No 2 MB Church {1798} Records
 1793 in Israel and from all those Brethren that
 that goes of with him and holds him as a Clean
 man e. and It is Voted by the Church that the Clerk
 Draws a with Draw and Presents it to the Church
 Same to the Church at their Next Conference
 Meeting containing a with Draw from Eldr Tanner
 and the brethren with him

and from all those Brethren that shall goes off with him and holds him as
 a Clean man and it is Voted by the Church that the Clerk Draws a with Draw
 and Presents it to the Same to the Church at their Next Conference Meeting
 Containing a with Draw from Eldr Tanner and the brethren with him

The real cause of Elder Tanner's fall from grace therefore did not actually involve his digging for gold or any other charge Deacon Bentley made against him, it came from his defying decisions made by the entire church and the association it was included in. As Elder Tanner's travail was endured over the space of four months before reaching a conclusion, the question might be asked, who was providing services?

Were there two separate churches existing at the same time? If, as alleged, Elder Tanner was conducting alternate services, they had to have been given in some semi- secret location. And if so, what he did represented the danger of splitting the church between his supporters and detractors at a vulnerable time when the new church was being built.

With a growing membership and the construction of a resplendent state of the art structure some of the more prominent church members may have thought it expedient to find a more charismatic pastor such as Elder Barber and abandon him as pastor. Just a cursory look at the minutes available indicate that a large portion of the "Brethren" were willing to accept his foibles, but it becomes evident that Deacon Bentley had an agenda opposing Elder Tanner's continuation as pastor.

Where Elder Tanner came from and what happened to him and his family, and the dark secret that Deacon Bentley may have been attempting to hide, will be disclosed at a later date.