

G. I.
BUTLER



An Honest but Misunderstood Church Leader

DENIS FORTIN



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CHAPTER ONE

A YANKEE STAMP

A Yankee of the extremest type.”
Yankees made good Adventists. When they were convinced of something, they did not change their minds.

In the fall of 1879, joining his colleague Robert Kilgore, George Butler spoke at the camp meeting of the recently organized Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The meeting held in Dallas had an attendance of about 125 campers, and Butler preached on the distinctive Adventist doctrines. He extolled the virtues of abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, which a few people seemed to oppose, to mark the unique lifestyle of God’s end-time people. Although his messages were well received, it felt odd for Butler to be among these people. Both he and Kilgore were Northern men, and given the still-recent end of a destructive Civil War, Butler had not expected too much affection from Texans. Kilgore had served as a captain in the Union army, and many in the audience had served on the Confederate side.

Butler was somewhat surprised to receive so much affection and fellowship from these Texans. Naturally, he could explain this good spirit toward them because of the truths they shared, which bound hearts and minds together in spite of cultural differences. Yet, he still felt at once confused and delighted. “I have never left a camp-meeting in all my experience,” he wrote in his report published in the *Review and Herald*, “with greater evidences of love from the people than I received from these Texans, *though I am a Yankee of the extremest type.*”¹

Toward the end of his life, George Butler, more than seventy-five years old, attended another camp meeting, this time in Worcester, Massachusetts, in June 1910. The elderly pioneer was again appreciated and enjoyed meeting with friends of long ago. “His sermons and talks on the early experiences

in this work . . . were greatly appreciated, and tended to inspire confidence and faith in this message.” He inspired “faith, hope, and courage . . . with reference to this great advent movement in which we are engaged, and to which we have dedicated our lives.”²

A week after returning to his home in Bowling Green, Florida, he wrote to William White and shared some of his impressions. “I will say the trip to old Yankee New England was perhaps the most desirable to me of any that I could imagine.” And then, reflecting on his own upbringing, he added that his early life experiences in New England had not lost “their charm though being far away for many years.” In fact, “the ‘Yankee’ stamp will cling to a fellow in spite of all the later experiences imaginable.”³

Yes, George Ide Butler, one of the most famous Seventh-day Adventist pioneers, and a dedicated pastor and evangelist—but a widely misunderstood church leader and theologian—was a Yankee from New England. More specifically, he was from a small village in central Vermont where his family had deep roots in the fabric of all that is Yankee. His grandfather, Ezra Butler, was a pioneer settler in the state and a Baptist minister who served in various public offices, including governor of Vermont (1826–1828). George Butler’s temperament, influence, and legacy were profoundly rooted in and stamped by this Yankee heritage. He would be known for his adherence to duty, his strength of character, his persistence and stubbornness, and his determination to work faithfully and with an unyielding love for a cause he believed in. To help us better understand Butler’s Yankee heritage, the first few chapters of this biography will focus on his family and cultural context.

A HOME IN CENTRAL VERMONT

About thirty miles up the Winooski River from Lake Champlain, at the confluence of Graves Creek coming down from the nearby mountains, one finds an ideal spot for a village with plenty of clean water, fish, and wildlife. It was, at first, a comfortable stop for Indians, French hunters, fur traders, and soldiers and was settled by Europeans only in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Today, the village of Waterbury, George Butler’s birthplace, is a small town located on this natural river trail that runs between Lake Champlain to the west and mountains overlooking the Connecticut River in the east, nestled among the *verts monts* (Green Mountains) of Vermont. This quiet

village rose out of the beautiful wilderness surrounding it and gave birth to a number of prominent citizens, sturdy and brave soldiers, and influential clergymen, as did many villages in Vermont in the early years of the new American nation.

In the early 1770s, Ethan Allen, who would become a famous patriot in the American Revolution, and his brother, Ira purchased thousands of acres of land in central Vermont, including most of the Winooski Valley. A dispute between the states of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York over land claims in this region was settled in New York's favor. The decision required that settlers pay fees to New York for the land they had already purchased from New Hampshire. As a result, disgruntled settlers formed their own independent Republic of Vermont. As historian David Ludlum observes, "The heritage of independence of action and originality of thought now accepted as characteristic of the Vermont personality" is rooted in "the spirit of self-reliance and radicalism so evident in the military and political happenings" of this early period. The spirit of liberty and independence, justice and fairness, was strong among the early settlers.⁴

The first European settlers began to arrive in Waterbury in the mid-1780s, only a few years after the township had been surveyed. Formally organized in 1790, it soon began to establish its place in Vermont's history. Like many other towns and villages in New England at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Waterbury was known for its small industries, mills, churches, and social activities. And like the rest of New England, it was decidedly a Yankee village. The second family to settle in the village in 1785 was that of Ezra Butler, "a man destined to stamp himself indelibly on the history of Waterbury and Vermont."⁵ His Yankee culture and religious life would also shape his grandson, George.

A PIONEER GRANDFATHER

George Butler's grandfather, Ezra Pitt Butler, was born on September 24, 1763, in the town of Lancaster, Massachusetts, the seventh of eleven children, to Asaph Butler (1729–1806) and Jane McAllister (1731–1770). By 1770, Asaph had moved the family to the village of West Windsor, Vermont, on the Connecticut River. Shortly afterward, following the death of his mother, Ezra went to live with the family of his eldest brother, Joel, with whom he spent about seven years.

At age fourteen, Ezra indentured himself to a physician, Dr. Thomas Sterne, of Claremont, New Hampshire, a practice widely followed in those days for young boys who did not have other possibilities for formal education. For seven years, Ezra served Dr. Sterne as an apprentice, and learned to read and write. In return, according to the terms of his contract, his master promised to provide him with “good and sufficient meat, Drink, Washing and lodging.”⁶ In other words, Ezra would be an all-purpose servant and, at the same time, receive practical education in numerous basic life and work skills that a young man like him needed in order to survive in New England. Once the indenture was completed, he would be a man well equipped to be on his own, to build his own house, operate his farm, and manage a small business.

But there were restrictions to carefully follow during those seven years—restrictions that stamped his character with the appropriate Yankee culture. As an apprentice, he was to serve his master faithfully and submit to all his commands. Furthermore, he was prohibited from committing fornication or getting married during the apprenticeship. He was strictly forbidden to play dice, cards, or any other unlawful games. He could not patronize taverns and must behave himself toward his master as a “faithfull Apprentice ought to do.”⁷

Ezra Butler’s service ended on December 31, 1784, interrupted only by a period of five months to serve as a private in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.⁸ According to his contract, at the end of his indenture, Butler received from Dr. Sterne two good suits of clothes and the equivalent of “sixty ounces Troy weight of Silver,” certainly a good sum of money for a young man just come of age, which he soon put to good use.⁹

Once spring arrived in 1785, Ezra Butler and his brother Asaph set out for Waterbury. The first part of the journey was made with a team of oxen as far as Williamstown, Vermont; the remainder on snowshoes pulling a sled with their necessary possessions—a distance of more than twenty-five miles through the wilderness, following the snow-covered trail along the White, Stevens, and then Winooski rivers. Arriving in Waterbury on March 20, the brothers were warmly greeted by James Marsh and his family, who had settled in Waterbury two years earlier. Wasting no time and without too much thought to proper land claims, they selected a plot of land suitable for their needs and set about to build a home. After clearing some land and

hastily planting a field of corn, they returned to Asaph's home in Weathersfield, Vermont. The selected plot, however, proved to be wrong, and Ezra had to start over in the right spot the following year.¹⁰

In the meantime, Ezra had found a sweetheart, Tryphena Diggins, and married in June. The newly married pair headed to Waterbury shortly after the wedding, carrying necessary household utensils on horseback. By September 1786, Ezra and Tryphena had properly settled their section of land, where they built a log cabin and soon replaced it with a spacious framed house.¹¹ In this home, their first child, Polly, was born on October 23, 1788. Three more children would follow over the next twenty years. Like all other settlers, the Butlers faced the same insistent challenges of cultivating enough food for their subsistence, along with the identical monotonous round of toil, hardships, and isolation—the type of existence that transformed simple men and women into pioneers.¹² In his early life, Butler was nothing more than a simple farmer devoted to his family and community. After his death, people remembered him as a man who “had no ambition, nor throughout his whole life did he seek for pre eminence.” In fact, his small frame, “stooping gait, slow speech, and a rather negligent costume” gave “a poor impression. . . . With him it was true to all intents that it is the ‘mind that makes the man.’”¹³

In the winter of 1790, Ezra Butler received from Thomas Chittenden, governor of the territory of Vermont, a warrant to hold the first meeting of freemen and organize the town of Waterbury, at which meeting he was chosen as town clerk. The town grew rapidly from fifteen families and a population of about 90 to 644 people by the turn of the century.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Vermont was itself coming into being. Since the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, various actions and declarations had set in motion the creation of a new state independent of New Hampshire and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In February 1791, the Federal Congress declared that on March 4 of that year, Vermont would be admitted into the United States of America as a new state. For the next decade, Ezra Butler's name appeared “in the town records in one or another official capacity, and always in connection with some local movement for growth and improvement.”¹⁵ Butler also served as a representative for Waterbury in the state legislature for most of 1794 to 1808 and, in 1804, was appointed for the first time to Vermont's electoral college for the presidential election.¹⁶ His

public service then moved to the judiciary. He served as the first judge of Chittenden County from 1803 to 1806, then chief justice of that county (1806–1811), and chief justice of Washington County (1814–1826). Butler progressively became better known for his leadership skills and collegial wisdom, and soon moved to the federal scene. He was elected to the United States House of Representatives to serve for one term, from 1813 to 1815.¹⁷

Butler's greatest accomplishment was to be elected in 1826, at the age of sixty-three, as governor of Vermont, a position he held for two one-year terms. Although his election was hardly contested and he won with a handsome majority, it set the stage for Vermont's anti-Masonic sentiments a few years later, which pitted the small-town rural class against the larger town business aristocracy, which was more likely to belong to a Masonic lodge.¹⁸ His administration as governor was marked by the suppression of lotteries, improvements in the state educational system, and a requirement that new teachers be qualified by a state board.¹⁹ After his service as governor, Butler retired. He held no other public office for the remainder of his life.²⁰

During his years as governor, Butler's political views were progressively shaped as his public career advanced. This was not unusual in the early nineteenth century when the political nature of the United States was still being formed—a mere thirty-five years following the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Butler's influence steadily increased in the years before the War of 1812 against Great Britain, and his temperament as a soft-spoken, nonpartisan leader attracted people. He was known to possess “a contemplative and discriminating mind.” Although he never attempted to be a leader, he seemed to exert his “influence, by a natural sagacity and soundness of judgment upon all matters before him.” His honesty and “upright discharge of his official duties for the public good” were valued.²¹

Ezra Butler's life of service characterizes a man with a Yankee mindset of the early nineteenth century. His work ethic exhibited an independence of judgment and reliance on one's own efforts. He was a practical man of strong determination to do what was right, carefully coming to conclusions, not easily swayed, and fiercely committed to duty. He believed in democracy and liberty, public order, and community spirit, and he encouraged the protection of public interest. These were strong qualities that were transplanted to a large extent when New England families migrated to western New York and further on into the Midwest, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan,

Illinois, and territories beyond the Mississippi River.²²

RELIGIOUS FAITH

Along with all his public functions, Ezra Butler was also a Baptist minister. “It is difficult to conceive how a staid Elder of the Baptist Church, ordained in 1801,” commented T. G. Lewis, “could have run the gamut of judicial, legislative and executive experiences and yet remain always a person of Christian meekness, dignity and propriety.”²³ Butler’s faith and religious devotion were not only private matters. They manifested themselves publicly in very tangible ways and shaped his view of the world. He was known as “a worthy and conscientious disciple of Jesus Christ, and was never ashamed of his profession.”²⁴

The Baptist church in Waterbury was the religious home of Ezra Butler and his family. Not so religiously inclined in his early years, Butler, however, experienced a conversion after his arrival in Waterbury. He was baptized and joined the Baptist church in nearby Bolton.²⁵ When the Waterbury Baptist Church was organized around 1800, Butler was ordained as its first pastor, beginning a long career as a volunteer, unremunerated clergyman until he died in 1838.²⁶

HIS CHILDREN

Ezra Butler lived his last few years at his home in Waterbury with his wife, Tryphena, who outlived him by five years, surrounded by their children and their families. Four children were born to Ezra and Tryphena. Their oldest daughter, Polly (born in 1788), died in 1821 of unknown causes.

Butler’s second daughter, Fanny (1800–1881), married Henry Fisk Janes and lived in Waterbury all her life. Henry Janes followed in his father-in-law’s footsteps and served as United States Congressman for Vermont’s fifth district in the House of Representatives from 1834 to 1837. He also served as state treasurer of Vermont (1838–1841) and as a member of the Vermont state legislature.²⁷ Their son, Henry Janes, became a well-known medical doctor and served in the Union Army during the Civil War as a medical surgeon and director of various field hospitals. After the war, he returned to Waterbury and held various public offices.²⁸

Ezra Butler’s youngest child, Russell (1807–1883), married Elizabeth M. Cook in 1843 but became a widower the following year. He lived all his

life in Waterbury.²⁹ Although intellectually astute and a lover of literature, “unlike his father, he avoided political life.” He emphatically declined to serve in any public office.³⁰

Governor Ezra Butler passed to his rest in 1838 after a long and productive life as a pioneer settler, farmer, Baptist minister, judge, politician, and public servant. He passed on many of his personal characteristics, his temperament, and his disposition to his eldest son, Ezra Pitt (1796–1875), who will be the subject of the next chapter, and to one of his grandsons, George Ide Butler. George Butler’s family would shift their passion from politics to religious life. They would become ardent supporters of the Second Advent Millerite movement in the 1840s and then join the early believers of a new Sabbatarian Adventist group. But their Yankee heritage would remain with them for the rest of their lives even as they transitioned from central Vermont to the Midwest state of Iowa.

1. George I. Butler, “The Texas Camp-Meeting,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 54, no. 22 (November 27, 1879): 172; emphasis added.

2. W. B. White, “The Central New England Camp-Meeting,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 87, no. 28 (July 14, 1910): 17.

3. George I. Butler to William C. White, July 16, 1910. The term *Yankee* means different things among Americans. Here in this context, Butler reflects on the stereotypical characteristics of shrewdness, thrift, and faithfulness to duty that were typical of an American born in the New England part of the United States in the nineteenth century.

4. David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791–1850* (Montpelier, VT: The Vermont Historical Society, 1948), 5. See also Ralph Nading Hill, *Yankee Kingdom: Vermont and New Hampshire* (New York: Harper, 1960), 96, 97.

5. Theodore Graham Lewis, ed., *History of Waterbury, Vermont, 1763–1915* (Waterbury, VT: Harry C. Whitehill, Record Print, 1915), 16.

6. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 18.

7. Lewis, 18.

8. At the age of seventeen, from July 6 to December 4, 1780, Ezra Butler served in the New Hampshire militia but did not participate in any battle, the conflict having moved south to the Carolinas by then. Ancestry.com. “U.S., Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783 results for Ezra Butler,” Ancestry.com, 80, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4282/?name=Ezra_Butler&military=1780_new+hampshire-usa_32&military_x=0-0-0&name_x=_1.

9. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 19. The anonymous writer of Butler’s obituary years later was less optimistic in his evaluation of Butler’s termination at the end of his indenture. “When he was of lawful age [i.e. 21] he had nothing but his hands, and honest principles,

to aid him through life." X. B. Y., "Gov. Butler of Vermont," *Burlington Free Press*, August 17, 1838, 1.

10. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 19, 20.

11. That home is still standing at 73 N. Main Street, Waterbury.

12. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 20.

13. X. B. Y., "Gov. Butler of Vermont," 1.

14. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 21, 23.

15. Lewis, 21.

16. Lewis, 23, 33, 34, 35. The State of Vermont voted for Thomas Jefferson, who easily won his second term.

17. Lewis, 48–50.

18. Kenneth A. Degree, "Anticipating Antimasonry: The Vermont Gubernatorial Election of 1826," *Vermont History* 72 (Winter/Spring 2004): 5–22.

19. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 59.

20. X. B. Y., "Gov. Butler of Vermont," 1.

21. X. B. Y., 1.

22. A good study of New England and Yankee cultural characteristics is found in David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13–205.

23. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 39.

24. X. B. Y., "Gov. Butler of Vermont," 1.

25. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 211, 212, 218.

26. Lewis, 212.

27. Both Fanny and Henry Janes are buried in the village cemetery. Lewis, 64–66.

28. Janes's home in Waterbury is now the site of the Waterbury Historical Society.

29. "Vermont, Vital Records, 1720–1908," Ancestry.com, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4661/?name=ezra_butler&birth=_vermont&death=1838_waterbury-vermont&name_x=_1.

30. Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 29.