The 1660s seem to have brought turmoil to the life of Ephraim Pennington, Jr. Born in 1645 in New Haven colony, New England, Ephraim probably grew up listening to the fiery sermons of John Davenport. From Davenport’s and other influences, he likely developed strong feelings about his faith and the proper workings of God’s church. Those feelings came under attack through the promulgation of the 1662 “half-way covenant,” a doctrine that undermined New England’s traditional standards for church membership. Simultaneously, his right to resist the covenant came under attack as liberal Connecticut moved to annex conservative New Haven.

Echoing his father’s generation, many of whom had emigrated from England in search of a favorable religious climate, Ephraim eventually chose to physically remove himself from the problem. He settled with like-minded dissenters in Newark, New Jersey, where he died at age 50. While few details survive about his life and accomplishments, his choice to leave New Haven for Newark illustrates the perseverance of the values that motivated New England’s first European settlers—purity through separation.

To understand the half-way covenant and the controversy it may have caused in Ephraim’s life, one must first understand the “New England system” of church government. Puritans in both the Old and New World placed great emphasis on “visible sainthood,” meaning outward evidence of one’s election to grace. As explained by Edmund Morgan, “In [old] England a reputation for godliness and the willingness to join a church forbidden by law had probably been sufficient evidence of sainthood.” New England, comprising almost entirely Puritans, had no such legal inhibitions. On the contrary, only church members could participate in civil government. As a result, the New England Puritans exercised more selectivity when
screening possible members.¹ The clergy required applicants to stand in front of their congregation and relate a “conversion narrative,” an account of the experiences that led them to recognize saving faith within themselves. Members would often question the applicant about certain aspects of his or her experience. A vote followed, usually requiring a unanimous affirmative to admit the applicant. If accepted, one could partake of the sacrament (becoming a member in “full communion”), and male members could vote.

By about 1636, New England Puritanism had thoroughly embraced and institutionalized the conversion narrative.² However, the Puritan practice of infant baptism combined with the need to demonstrate saving faith created an unexpected quandary. The ability to deliver an acceptable conversion narrative often failed to develop until one’s mid- to late 20s, usually after one had married and probably had children as well. Morgan explains the ensuing dilemma as follows:

When an unconverted child of a church member produced a child of his own, the minister of his church was presented with a problem. . . . The new father (or mother) had been in some sense a member of the church. Was he still? If so, was he a member in a different sense than before? What about the child? Was the child a member? Should the child be baptized?³

Throughout the summer of 1662, New England leadership held a synod at Boston to address the issue. The synod concluded in September with a declaration of seven propositions, the fifth of which became the focal point of serious debate:

Church-members who were admitted in minority [i.e. baptized as infants], understanding the Doctrine of Faith, and publickly professing their assent thereto; not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the Covenant before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the Church, their children are to be Baptized.⁴

In essence, children of unconverted but baptized Puritans could also be baptized as long as their parents lived as good Puritans. Such parents, the synod decided, continued as members
with limited privileges, subject to ecclesiastical discipline and able to have their children
baptized, but still forbidden from partaking of the Lord’s Supper or voting.

Led by New Haven minister John Davenport, opponents of the synod’s decision decried
this concept of partial membership, scornfully naming it the “half-way covenant.” A
contemporary once wrote of Davenport, “Church Purity [is] one of his greatest Concernments
and Endeavors . . . he used a more than ordinary Exactness in Trying, those that were Admitted
unto the Communion of the Church. . . .” This exactitude led Davenport to publish the lengthy
1663 tract, Another Essay for the Investigation of the Truth, presenting a point-by-point
refutation of the half-way covenant.

Another Essay actually comprises three independently authored sections, only the middle
of which belongs to Davenport. A youthful Increase Mather, not yet ordained to the ministry,
wrote the first section, published anonymously as an “Apologetic Preface to the Reader.” Mather
addresses accusations leveled at the dissenters themselves and at the doctrinal
implications of rejecting the half-way covenant. To supporters of the 1662 synod, the dissenters’
stance smacked of anabaptism—denial of baptism to anyone not capable of comprehending the
meaning of it, especially infants and young children. The “Apologetic Preface” denies this
charge, asserting that dissenters would not withhold baptism from all children, but neither could
they offer it to all children.

Mather leaves explanations to Davenport, who provides them through a tedious
discussion on the state of membership possessed by baptized adults if they fail to obtain full
communion with a congregation. He defines several states of membership, especially
distinguishing between mediate and immediate members. Children are mediate members, he
says, because they rely on their parents’ membership for church privileges. Adults lose that
mediation, thus becoming *immediate* if they prove their sainthood. Of course, many did not, about whom he concludes,

...though they have not been discovenanted, by being cast out, or cut off from their Covenant-relation; yet they are discovenanted, by violating their Parents’ Covenant for them, through their not performing that whereunto they were engaged thereby, in that, when they became adult, they did not regularly enter into the Covenant with the Lord and his Church, for themselves and theirs, as their Parents, if they were godly, did ... Davenport rejects the idea that one can continue in the covenant simply by avoiding formal expulsion from the congregation. While his reasoning is obscure, the third treatise included in *Another Essay*, written by Nicholas Street, Davenport’s colleague in the New Haven ministry, provides support through more accessible analogies. Drawing on one particular phrase from the requirements of the halfway covenant, “understanding the Doctrine of Faith, and publickly professing their assent thereto; not scandalous in life,” Street states, “The devil *understands the doctrine of Faith, and doth assent thereunto.*...” Furthermore, “Not *scandalous in life* is wholly Negative, and may be said of irrational Animals.”

The year following *Another Essay*, Massachusetts ministers Richard Mather (father of Increase) and Jonathan Mitchell published *A Defence of the Answer and Arguments of the Synod met at Boston in the Year 1662*. As its name suggests, the book defends the half-way covenant and answers *Another Essay*’s objections. Mather and Mitchell’s doctrinal explications tend to the same obscurity as Davenport’s, often relying on semantics to prove a point. Most easily understood among their arguments are appeals to simpler concepts, such as rule of the majority: “So farre as Respect is to be given to men (or as the Authority of men’...s judgements will go) therein the greater part are (*ceteris paribus* [i.e., all else being equal]) to be preferred before the lesser.” *A Defence of the Answer* also claims a more strict interpretation of scripture, stating, “though we think it too great a Laxness to baptize all [children of purported Christian heritage],
yet we are past doubt, that so to do is farre nearer the Rule and Mind of Christ, when he sayes
{Disciple all Nations, baptizing them} then to baptize no Children.” Mather and Mitchell quote
Mark 10:14, “Suffer the little children to come unto me . . . for of such is the kingdom of God,”
as additional support for their interpretation.

The debate between New Haven and Boston might have raged indefinitely had it not been
for coinciding political circumstances. Two years prior to the 1662 synod, the New Haven
government chose to clearly define the border with neighboring Connecticut. Certain
Connecticut residents responded unfavorably, perhaps fearing loss of land. Instead of seeking an
amicable settlement, Connecticut cited New Haven’s lack of charter and claimed all of New
Haven’s land as rightful Connecticut property. Furthermore, they sent their governor, John
Winthrop, Jr., to England to request an official recognition of Connecticut’s claim to New
Haven. Winthrop believed that uniting the two colonies would benefit both strategically and
economically, but that Connecticut should not force New Haven to unite, regardless of his
success in England. The Connecticut general court assented to his policy, promising not to
enforce a patent against New Haven’s will, should Winthrop succeed.

New Haven did not take kindly to Connecticut’s intentions, despite Winthrop’s
moderation and supposedly good intentions. Connecticut had long held a reputation for laxity in
their church admissions process, even before the half-way covenant, and their New Haven
neighbors would not abide the rule of such an impure government. New Haven residents cared
far more about religious orthodoxy than economic or strategic advantage.

Governor Winthrop obtained control of New Haven in April 1662, and the colonies
learned of it the following September—coincident with the official proposal of the half-way
covenant. Soon after, New Haven’s Southold plantation defied the rest of the colony by
applying for representation in the Connecticut general court. Reneging on its promise not to interfere in New Haven without New Haven’s consent, the general court admitted Southold, setting an inflammatory precedent. Thereafter, any disgruntled citizen of New Haven could seek Connecticut protection, and Connecticut would not turn them away.20

For the next year, New Haven and Connecticut traded unification proposals and heated words. Connecticut eventually promised not to meddle in New Haven’s most important issue, maintaining control of their church system, but New Haven would not accept this or any other concession until Connecticut relinquished control of Southold and other plantations. They demanded the right to negotiate as the united colony they once were, before Connecticut had embraced their dissenters.21

The unexpected arrival of a Royal Commission in the late summer of 1663 destroyed New Haven’s chances for a solution in their favor. On 30 November of that year, the Commissioners officially affirmed Connecticut’s claim to New Haven.22 Connecticut, no longer obligated to offer concessions to their stubborn neighbors, took control of New Haven without any guarantee of ecclesiastical autonomy.23

Ephraim Pennington’s place in this controversy is not certain, yet bits of evidence afford plausible assumptions. No records survive about where Ephraim attended church, yet his father certainly commurred with Davenport’s congregation.24 We may assume that Ephraim attended Davenport’s sermons while growing up, but at some point he seems to have affiliated himself with Abraham Pierson, a minister supportive of Davenport and equally opposed to the half-way covenant. Sometime around 1644, Pierson had led a portion of his congregation from Connecticut to New Haven, preferring New Haven’s theocratic principles to Connecticut’s. Chafing at the “Christless rule of Connecticut” following New Haven’s annexation, Pierson once
again uprooted his followers and founded Newark, New Jersey, in May 1666. Ephraim Pennington, who would have been twenty-one at the time, was not among the original group of Newark settlers. However, Newark town records mention his arrival in 1667. New Haven court documents suggest he may have perhaps stayed behind to settle some matters of the estate he inherited from his father. Regardless, one can safely assume that Ephraim maintained strong ties to Pierson’s congregation.

Available records do not indicate whether Ephraim had gained full communion with Pierson’s church, but it seems unlikely that he would have removed to Newark if he did not share an aversion to the half-way covenant. Having inherited about £50 and a good portion of riverfront land upon his father’s death, Ephraim easily could have made a comfortable life for himself in New Haven, but he chose otherwise. New England’s first European residents had ventured across the ocean to establish a colony based on religious principles outlawed in England. Ephraim’s resettlement at Newark demonstrates the persistence of that idea, choosing to create a new Zion as an old one fell to the world.

5 Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 132.
6 Ibid., 108.
8 [Increase Mather], “Apologetic Preface to the Reader,” in John Davenport, *Another Essay for the Investigation of the Truth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1663). The original publication does not provide page numbers for the preface.
10 Ibid., 23.
11 Nicholas Street, “Considerations Upon the Seven Propositions Concluded by the Synod Sitting at Boston, June 10th, 1662,” in Davenport, 67.
12 Richard Mather, 2.
13 Ibid., 6.
14 Ibid., 15.
16 Ibid., 456, 448-50.
18 Atwater, 459-60.
19 Hall, 104-105. Although the synod published their proposals in September 1662, Hall and Joyce demonstrate that the wording of the fifth proposition had been decided upon as early as July.
20 Atwater, 463-65.
21 Ibid., 507-8.
22 Ibid., 517-18.
23 Ibid., 520-22.
28 Dexter, Ancient Town Records, vol. 1, 80, 468, 471.