

What the History of Baptists Can Teach Us

Jeff Waldrop, ABHS Board of Managers

Baptists of all stripes play a vital role in American life and thought. The journey has been difficult, but the Baptist experience sheds light on our context today. Several scenes from Baptist history parallel our current situation.

Many Baptists were Refugees

Beginning in the 1630's Puritan immigrants, seeking refuge from Anglican persecution in England, began arriving to the area of North America that would eventually become New England. While most retained their Puritan beliefs, eventually establishing the Congregationalist tradition, some became Baptists, such as Roger Williams, John Clarke, and others who subsequently became refugees as they sought religious freedom in Rhode Island. By the end of the 17th century, Baptist immigrants were arriving in New England as part of a larger English/Welsh Baptist migration to the area.

In 1655, Thomas Gould of Boston, along with his wife, refused to present their baby for baptism. (With the belief that those who died unbaptized were consigned to hell, not baptizing an infant was construed as child abuse.) The next



several years found Gould the subject of persecution by ecclesiastical authorities, including imprisonment, spiritual

banishment, and exile from Boston. In 1665, Gould organized the First Baptist Church of Boston, which would become one of the most influential Baptist congregations through the First Great Awakening. But with prominence came unwanted attention by the authorities, and members were eventually forced to seek refuge temporarily on Noddle Island in Boston Harbor.

Baptists were persecuted for being different

Baptists were penalized for simply practicing a faith that contradicted the theological norms of their fellow colonists. In 1651, Baptists Obadiah Holmes, John Clarke, and John Crandall were arrested by Congregationalist authorities in Lynn, Massachusetts. All three were jailed and fined, and Holmes was eventually flogged.

Baptists in other colonies, such as Anglican-controlled Virginia, would also meet with persecution. In 1768, in a courthouse in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, Lewis Craig became the first Baptist to be convicted in a court of law for illegal preaching. Between 1768-1777, twenty-nine more Separate Baptists in Virginia would be imprisoned, whipped, or executed for preaching without a license.

Baptists were eventually accepted

While freedom from compulsory ecclesiastical taxation would not be realized throughout the new country until 1833, general persecution of Baptists ended during the Revolutionary War era. With the passage of the Toleration Act of

(Continued on page 6)

Church Anniversaries

April – June

We celebrate the faithful ministry of American Baptist congregations and their pastors! The following churches notified ABHS that they are celebrating anniversaries this quarter:

225 Years

First Baptist Peddie Memorial Church, Newark, NJ,
Rev. Nicholas A. Johnson, pastor

200 Years

First United Baptist Church, Lowell, MA
Rev. Dr. James W. Sinclair and Rev. Kevin Porter,
pastors

Monumental Baptist Church, Philadelphia, PA
Rev. Dr. J. Wendell Mapson, Jr., pastor

183 Years

First Baptist Church of Cranford/Elizabeth,
Elizabeth, NJ
Rev. Malachy M. Williams, senior pastor



Primary Source

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Atlanta, GA 30341

160 Years

Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Farnham, VA
Rev. Dr. Timothy Tee Boddie, pastor

150 Years

Hampton Baptist Church, East Bank, WV
Donald L. Stennett, Pastor
Providence Missionary Baptist Church, Scott Depot,
WV
Rev. Keith A. George, pastor

110 Years

Amity Baptist Church, Jamaica, NY
Rev. Jeffrey S. Thompson, pastor

50 Years

Society for Helping Church, Philadelphia, PA
Overseer Lillie M. Jackson

If your church is celebrating a significant anniversary, notify ABHS and request a certificate. We want to celebrate with you!

Gifts have been given in Memory of:

Sally Lewis Dodgson
Dr. Kenneth Dodgson

Amos H. Dudley
Cheryl F. Dudley

Rev. Harley Hunt
David G. Hunt

Jack Ketcham
James B. Ketcham

in Honor of:

Stephen and Joyce Hasper
Randolph Miller

These 2025 tribute donations were inadvertently left out of the winter *Primary Source*. ABHS regrets the omissions.

Digital Update

Jenny Manasco, Digital Collections Specialist

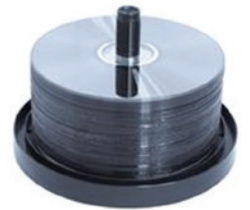


After two years with the Japanese American Confinement Sites (JACS) project taking much of our time and energy in digital archives, we are transitioning back into “normal” operations. This means we are focusing on scanning degrading microfilm, digitizing other parts of our collections on request, and completing the last uploads of “legacy” digital materials (items scanned prior to 2022). It also means processing incoming digital materials. Until now, the latter has been the smallest part of our digital archives program. Not that it is unimportant; we simply have not received very much digital content with incoming collections. That is slowly changing and we expect it will become an ever-larger part of our task. But why is it only now starting to change?

Archival collections are rarely “up-to-date” collections. The majority of materials that we receive are at least 20-50 years old. When we receive deposits from our American Baptist institutional partners, for example, it is often because someone has retired. At that time, older files are sent to the archives and newer ones are kept by their successor. Depending on how long the person had been in their position, the files sent to archives may be ten, twenty, or even thirty years old.

In the case of personal papers of a pastor or missionary, there is often even more of a delay in records being deposited in an archive. Perhaps the individual retired and intended to write a memoir. Or perhaps they didn’t think anyone would be interested in their correspondence, diaries, sermons, or other writings. When they die twenty years later, the family finds boxes of old letters and documents. But they don’t have time to go through them and the papers sit in storage for another fifteen years. Finally, children or grandchildren decide they have to do something with all these boxes and they contact us. (Missionaries and MKs, please take heed!)

Which brings up one of the paradoxes of digital archives. We think if something is digital it will last forever. But the reality is that digital media is much more fragile than paper. Paper can sit in a box for 200 years, and if kept dry and away from insects or rodents, it will likely be as legible as it was when it went in. Yet someone retiring today, who used digital media for most of their career, might have digital files stored on a variety of media



(floppy disks anyone?) and in a variety of obsolete formats (.PDF wasn’t even a thing until 1993). If you, like me, remember those truly floppy disks – the 5.25-inch ones – you know how easily they got bent and became unreadable. The smaller 3.5-inch ones were better but even those are often unreadable after 30+ years. Ensure the preservation of your legacy of ministry *and* make the lives of future digital archivists easier by

migrating (updating) your files periodically to keep them in a current format.



Opportunities to see the JACS Exhibit:

March – April	Franklin College, Franklin, IN
April	Brewster Baptist Church, Brewster, MA
May	Amache National Historic Site, Grenada, CO
May-June	First UCC, West Hartford, CT
June	Royersford Baptist Church, Royersford, PA
June	Calvary Baptist Church, Newark, DE
September	Berkeley School of Theology, Berkeley, CA
October	Denison University, Granville, OH
October	ABCOFLASH

From the Archives: Robert Hudson Collection, RG 1496

Mariah Hamby, Head of Archives and Special Collections

autumn indicate some better course.
 None of us can form plans for the future. What is before us we cannot foresee, and we have to live by the day, walking constantly by faith. We are overwhelmed with sorrow, and have to weep between the porch and the altar, ever saying, "Save thy people, O Lord, and give not thy heritage to reproach." But we must do something more than weep and pray. A crisis has come that demands united, vigorous action; and, in our sadness of heart, it is refreshing to see the patriotic uprising of the whole North to put down this wicked rebellion and sustain our insulted government. I am a man of peace; but the peril of my country's flag has stirred my soul to its lowest depths, and I

Excerpt (pgs 2-3) from a letter from Baron Stow during the onset of the Civil War, 1861. RG 1496, Box 4, Folder 13.

have spoken out as I had never expected to be required to speak. I have great confidence that our side will ultimately triumph; but the conflict will be severe, and the land will be filled with mourning.
 Your nephew, Charles F. took tea with us one evening last week. He is wide awake and hopeful. We miss him painfully from our home circle—he always brought us sunshine. He, like yourself, had heard nothing from dear George.
 The papers of this morning show that something vigorous is to be done this week. Baltimore must permit the transit of your troops, or she will be compelled by batteries and bazookas. Virginia, too, will be made to feel that she cannot threaten Washington

My dear Sister Sarah,

[After sharing personal news, the letter continues:]

None of us can form plans for the future. What is before us we cannot foresee, and we have to live by the day, walking constantly by faith. We are overwhelmed with sorrow, and have to weep between the porch and the altar, ever saying, "Save thy people, O Lord, and give not thy heritage to reproach." But we must do something more than weep and pray. A crisis has come that demands united, vigorous action; and, in our sadness of heart, it is refreshing to see the patriotic uprising of the whole North to put down this wicked rebellion and sustain our insulted government. I am a man of peace; but the peril of my country's flag has stirred my soul to its lowest depths, and I have spoken out as I had never expected to be required to speak. I have great confidence that our side will ultimately triumph; but the conflict will be severe, and the land will be filled with mourning. . . .

Mrs. S. & M. join in warm expressions of love. I remember your niece Elizabeth, and wish you to inform her of my kindest wishes.

Your brother in heart,

Baron Stow

We invite you to share information from Primary Source with others. When you use material from "From the Archives" remember to give credit to the American Baptist Historical Society.



Robert Hudson with Priscilla Eppinger

What began as a love for Big League baseball autographs transformed into a passion for preserving Baptist history.

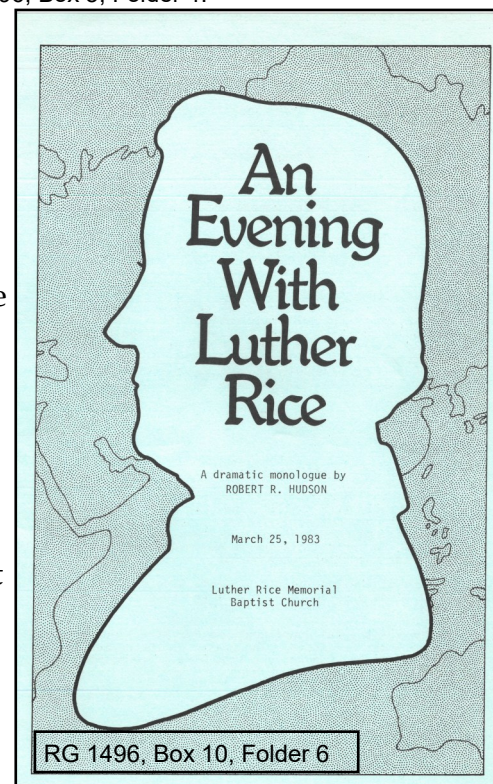
After encountering an original journal from Luther Rice that ABHS Executive Director Bill Brackney took to the 1979 meeting of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, Robert Hudson's collecting priorities expanded to letters, journals, autographs, photographs, and publications, all signed by Baptists.

RG 1496 measures nearly 6 linear feet, dates from the 1750s to the early 2000s, and is the result of Hudson's decades-long dedication to the collection and preservation of Baptist documents.

Very dear Bro. Washington D.C. Dec 22nd 1821
 By these papers you will learn a little of the progress of the our concerns here. Prospects at present are peculiarly propitious I do think this College by the blessing of the Lord will rise into consideration and usefulness. The missionary cause is in some place gaining ground with the luminary or Star—or both if you wish. Please drop a line by mail —
 Ever most sincerely
 Yours
 Luther Rice
 Mrs. Mearns

Luther Rice correspondence concerning Columbian College (now George Washington University), 1821. RG 1496, Box 5, Folder 4.

Luther Rice (1783-1836) was a figure of influence and intrigue for Bob Hudson, himself a graduate of George Washington University, which Rice had helped found. Hudson's research into Rice, an early American Baptist missionary and fundraiser for missions, resulted in a monologue that Bob wrote and presented to Baptist groups.



(Continued from page 1)

1688 in England, nonconformists had gained freedom to worship without fear of reprisals, but Baptists in the American colonies continued to endure discrimination, and appealed to both Baptists and civil authorities in England for help.

As American colonial leaders prepared to wage war with England, they realized that Baptists were needed to strengthen the patriotic cause. Baptist leaders such as Isaac Backus negotiated a truce with Congregational authorities and organized Baptists in New England for participation in the war effort. After the Revolutionary war, Baptists spread rapidly throughout the American states and into the frontier, sharing the love of Christ, planting churches, and laying the foundation for a brand of Evangelical religion that met not only the spiritual needs of people, but physical ones also.

Baptists exerted positive influence

The many American Baptist accomplishments in missions, social work, prison ministry, and multicultural ministry cannot possibly be listed here. However, a few examples stand out. After the Civil War, Northern Baptists sent teachers, church planters, and other professionals to the southern states for the purpose of assisting African Americans with education, job skills, and church organization. In the decades leading up to and after World War II, American Baptists provided educators, missionaries, and church

planters to Chinese and Japanese communities on the west coast. In both instances, Northern/American Baptists offered social and spiritual service when other Christian groups failed to do so.

What does the History of American Baptists Teach us?

In our context, many immigrant Christians, Baptists included, are being depicted as criminals on the national stage. Actions taken against immigrant communities closely parallel the persecution suffered by Baptists in the early American colonies. Many immigrant pastors are preaching a message of hope amidst suffering as did the Baptists. Also, like Baptists during the Revolutionary War, pastors and immigrant community leaders urge a message of resilience, political action, and patience. A significant part of the American cultural fabric, immigrants are also responsible for church growth in the US. History shows us that as the next generation of Baptists emerges from immigrant communities, there is little doubt that they will continue to impact American life. By so doing, they will further add to an already stellar Baptist tradition.



In addition to serving on the ABHS Board of Managers, Dr. Jeffrey Waldrop is Dean of the University Libraries and Associate Professor of Church History at Mercer University. Born in South America, and raised in the Caribbean and the United States, Jeff is fluent in several languages and feels at home within diverse cultures.

Spotlight on Volunteers

Former ABHS Board of Managers president Rev. Esther Irish and her husband, Rick, took advantage of a trip to Atlanta in support of a grandchild's cheer competition to spend a few days assisting archivist Mariah Hamby.

Former ABHS Board of Managers president Rev. Garth Brokaw drove to Atlanta from Rochester, NY, and spent 2 weeks sorting and organizing archival materials from Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. He returned in advance of the spring board meeting to continue working on materials from CRCDS.



Esther Irish (above) points to her name on the plaque of ABHS Board Presidents. Garth Brokaw (left) displays some of the many boxes of records he sorted and organized.

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**INSIDE: We appreciate
our volunteers!**

Call for Submissions: **Torbet Essay Contest** Best Essay *in any area of Baptist History*

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:

- ★ Submissions make a unique contribution to the field of Baptist history and/or theology;
- ★ Author has not already published a major scholarly work;
- ★ Professional and academic writing standards are met, especially re: attributions and citations;
- ★ Citations, format, and style follow the latest edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*;
- ★ Maximum length: 25 double-spaced pages (excluding notes);
- ★ Submission is in final draft form, free from errors and ready for publication.

The winning essay is eligible for publication in *Foundations* and its author awarded a \$500 prize.

Deadline for Entries is September 1

Send entry, contact information, and a brief bio including a list of prior publications to:
ABHSoffice@ABHSarchives.org

This annual prize was established in honor of Robert G. Torbet to encourage development of young scholars in the field of Baptist history studies, thus the work of emerging scholars will be especially considered.

Robert George Torbet (1912-1995) was an American Baptist historian and educator, who taught church history at Eastern Seminary (1944-1952), served as director of educational services for the American Baptist Board of Education and Publication (1952-1958), as dean and church history professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary (1958-1967), and as ABCUSA Associate General Secretary for Ecumenical Relations (1967-1977). To recognize his contributions to Baptist research and publication, ABHS established this prize to encourage development of young scholars in the field of Baptist history studies.