

Rev. Thomas W. Woolsey: Pioneer Virginia Baptist Minister By William J. Bryan, PhD

The Reverend Thomas W. Woolsey was born in November 1719 in Bedford, Westchester County, New York. Records indicate that he may have been reared in the Dutch Reformed Church and perhaps was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church as an adult.¹ Woolsey married Elizabeth Waters, and after being widowed married Sarah Pierce. While still living in New York, he became a Baptist.²

At the age of 52, Woolsey moved south to Virginia with his family and several other Baptist families, among whom were the Bishops, Coles, Thomases, and Wheelers.³ Land records indicate that Woolsey and his Baptist party eventually settled around 1771 on the South Fork of the Holston River near the present-day hamlet of Adwolve, VA.⁴ He was received into the membership of Smith and Linville's Creek church near New Market, VA by transfer of letter from a Baptist church in New York and was subsequently ordained a Baptist minister in 1772 by Rev. John Alderson.

Rev. Woolsey appears to be the first Baptist minister active in Southwestern Virginia, and he may be the first minister of any denomination active in this area. Court records of Washington Co., VA from May 15, 1781, reveal that Rev. Thomas Woolsey was formally certified as a regular Baptist minister by Jonathan Bishop, John Pierce, and Hellens Dungins.

While uncertain of all the reasons for the migration of these Baptist families, it is likely that their desire for religious liberty was part of their motivation in moving to the frontier. In much of Colonial America, Baptists as well as those from other minority denominations were forced to be part of the established church in their region. Baptist ministers were often prohibited from preaching, conducting weddings, and performing baptisms. Baptists in Virginia were required to attend the Anglican church, to have their children baptized as infants in that church, and to pay taxes to support the state church. Those who dissented or acted in opposition to the state church were often fined or imprisoned. On the frontier, early Baptists found some freedom from this religious persecution.

The call for liberty, including religious liberty, was at the core of the American colonies' battle for independence from England. Historically, Baptists have stood on strong theological and moral ground in their fight for religious liberty for all people. Religious liberty in essence is the right to worship or not worship God according to individual conscience. True worship can never be forced but must be freely given by the worshiper. Advocates of religious liberty deplore the establishment of any prescribed religion or of any religious test by the state.

In 1780, near the end of America's initial fight for liberty, the British were gaining ground in their southern advance from South Carolina into North Carolina under the command of British Major Patrick Ferguson. When the call for patriots to check this advance went out, Rev. Woolsey



(Continued on page 6)

Church Anniversaries

July-September

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

200 Years

American Baptist Churches of Greater Indianapolis
Rev. Dr. Michael P. Friday, Regional Executive Minister
First Baptist Church, Milton, PA
Jamie Dries, senior pastor
First Baptist Gainesville, Gainesville, GA
Rev. Dr. Tony Lankford, pastor
West Fork Baptist, Versailles, IN
Mark Calvert, pastor

190 Years

First Baptist Church of Kalamazoo, Kalamazoo, MI
Rev. Dr. Sanchita Kisku, pastor

175 Years

First Baptist Church of Corunna, Corunna, MI
Rev. Tony L. Moore, pastor
First Baptist Church of Greater Des Moines, Johnston, IA
Rev. Paul Scaringi, pastor

150 Years

Slate Valley Baptist Church, Geuda Springs, KS
Rev. Jim Kiker, pastor
Union Valley Baptist Church, Parkersburg, WV
Rev. Jonathan Butcher, pastor



First Baptist Church of Canton, Canton, KS
Rev. Charlotte Maxwell, pastor

121 Years

Sheldon Street Baptist Church, Providence, RI
Michael Clemons, pastor

115 Years

Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Madison, WI
Rev. Dr. Marcus Allen Sr., pastor

100 Years

Damascus Missionary Baptist Church, Cleveland, OH
Rev. Dr. Samuel V. Harrell, pastor
Bethany Baptist Church, Cleveland, OH
Rev. Dr. Stephen Rowan, pastor
Mount Carmel Baptist Church, Beverly, WV
Rev. Leon W. Brown, pastor

25 Years

Embrace Church, Evansville, IN
David Huff, pastor

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

Primary Source

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*Jeri took me here for
my birthday. Too
many exhibits and
not enough time!*

*We're grateful
that we got free
admission with
our Time*

Travelers card.

Thanks!

Paul



How have you benefitted from your ABHS membership?

Send us a postcard and let us know!

Digital Update

Jenny Manasco, Digital Collections Specialist



This summer, we are benefitting from the efforts of two interns, one remote and one on-site. With our archivist, Mariah Hamby, out on maternity leave, I have been the one to work with both interns.

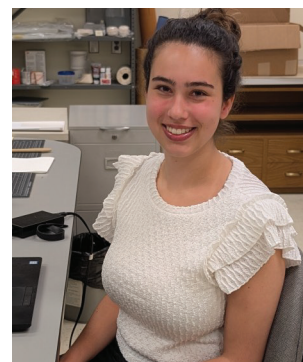


Nicholas Fong is working on his Master's degree in Library and Information Science (MLIS) at Dominican University, having earned a BS in Information Technology at Arizona State University. He chose to work with ABHS to fulfill the requirements for the practicum in advanced archival principles and practices. Nicholas is a member of North Shore Baptist Church in Chicago, where multiple generations of his family have been pillars. Nicholas's primary project has been organizing and cataloging the records of North Shore Baptist Church. The interesting part was that he got to look

through old church minute books, membership records and photographs. A less interesting aspect was building an inventory of NSBC's archives. Typically, each box and the folders of documents in the box will be assigned a number and the folder titles will be listed in the spreadsheet. Such inventories for a sizeable collection can run thousands of lines on a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet listing boxes, folders, and other items is then used to create catalog entry; these inventories are what you see when you use the "Search the Archives" section of our website. Eventually the spreadsheet for the NSBC archives will be uploaded to the ABHS online catalog.

Our in-house intern this summer is Lauren Murrath, from Buford, GA. Lauren is a senior at Louisiana State University majoring in International Studies and History. With career aspirations of working in museum archives and collections, Lauren chose to spend part of her summer in an internship at ABHS.

Lauren says, "I've always loved history and learning about a person's story. After looking into what to do with a history degree I was immediately drawn to archives." She has particularly enjoyed working with ABHS photo collections, saying, "You can tell so much about a culture from various images of day to day life. A lot of the photos have no agenda or deeper meaning, just life."



Lauren has had the opportunity to learn about many areas of archival practice. She has prepared several inventories of small collections or additions to existing collections, checked our periodical holdings on the shelves against our inventory (and located one or two that were listed as missing), and learned what it takes to digitize a reel of microfilm. One aspect of archival work that surprised Lauren is how all aspects of the work are connected, from processing to digitizing, and that digitizing requires some knowledge of coding.

It is encouraging to work with the next generation of archivists like Nicholas and Lauren!

Opportunities to see the JACS Exhibit in 2026:

August-September	Denison University, Granville, OH
September	Berkeley School of Theology, Berkeley, CA
October 9-10	ABC of New York State biannual meeting, Kenmore Baptist Church, Buffalo, NY

If you would like to host the Japanese American Confinement Sites exhibit, please contact Jenny Manasco (J.Manasco@ABHSarchives.org.).

From the Archives: Revolutionary Documents

Mariah Hamby, Head of Archives and Special Collections

In 1775 the American Revolution had begun. The Continental Congress recommended a day of fasting and prayer on July 20 and Rev. David Jones preached a sermon entitled, "Defensive War in a Just Cause, Sinless." The sermon was so influential that it was published and read throughout the colonies.

The pamphlet is readily accessible online; modern copies are offered for purchase through Walmart and Amazon. However, there is only one original, handwritten copy of the sermon, and it is found in the ABHS archives. Exemplar pages are shown below.

To hear part of the sermon preached, go to <https://www.nmar.org/2026rafconference.html>.

Charles Thomson (1729 – 1824)

In 1739 Charles Thomson's widowed father, John, and his young sons migrated from Ireland to the British colonies in North America. John Thomson died at sea, and Charles and his brothers arrived Delaware orphaned and penniless.

Thirty-five years later Charles Thomson was a leader of Philadelphia's Sons of Liberty. He became one of the Founding Fathers of the USA, serving as the secretary of the Continental Congress (1774-1789).

ABHS has an extract from Journals of the Continental Congress, written by Charles Thomson and signed by John Hancock (at right).

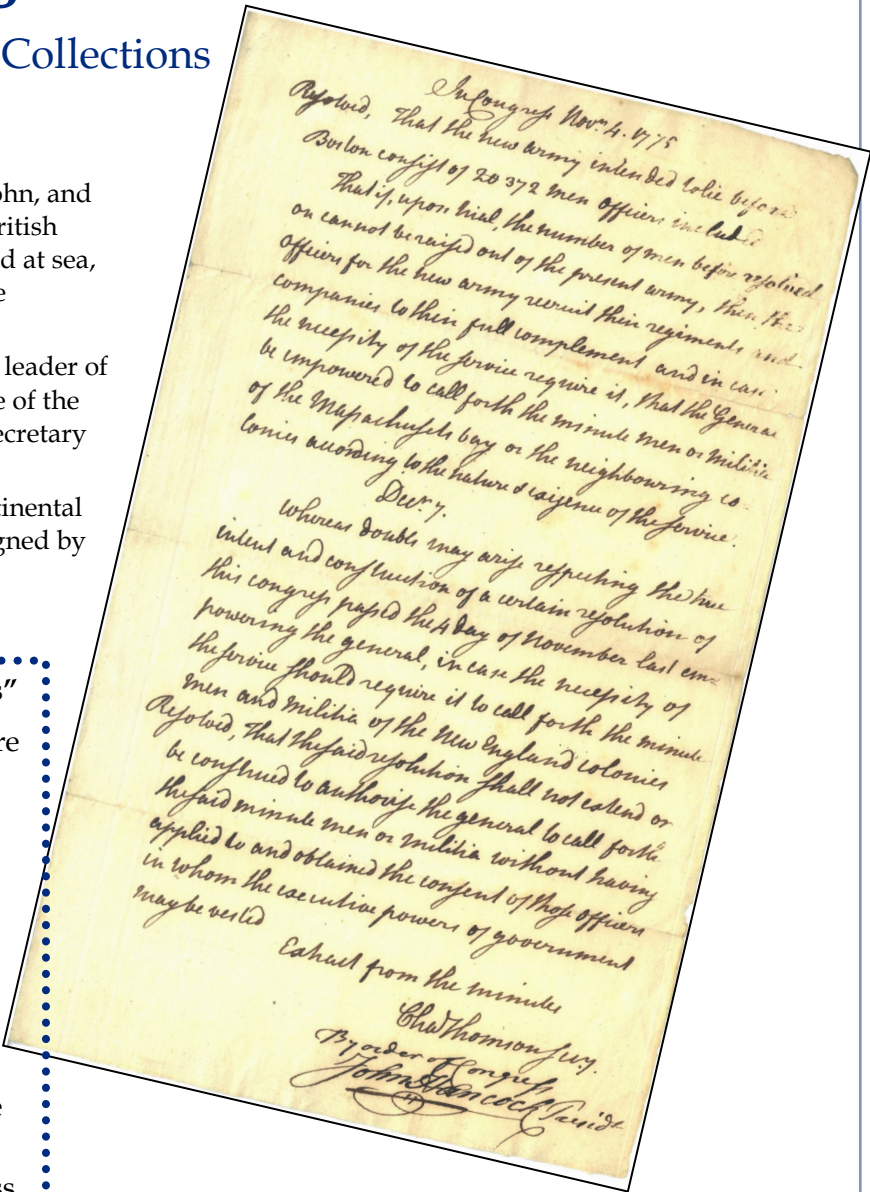
Partial transcription of David Jones's "Defensive War in a Just Cause, Sinless"

An endeavour shall be made to prove, that in some cases, when a people are oppressed, insulted and abused, and can have no other redress, it then becomes our duty as men, with our eyes to GOD, to fight for our liberties and properties; or in other words, that a defensive war is sinless before GOD, consequently to engage therein, is consistent with the purest religion.

The following are thought to enjoin non-resistance in the strongest terms, namely: *Let every soul be subject to the higher powers: For there is no power but of GOD; the powers that be, are ordained of GOD.*

But, in order rightly to understand these words, it is of great importance to determine first, what is meant by the higher powers: For this is what every soul is to be subject unto. We shall find no exposition liable to less exception, than to understand by the higher powers the just, the good, the

wholesome and constitutional laws of a land, merely respecting civil government. The very design of these higher powers is to secure the property and promote the happiness of the whole community. — These higher powers therefore appear as binding on princes as on people. And as GOD has ordained these powers for the good of the whole, whosoever resisteth the same, resisteth the ordinance of GOD, and receiveth finally condemnation, and that justly; for anarchy and tyranny are essentially the same, and equally to be dreaded, as each resists the higher powers. We cannot suppose, either that this text enjoins absolute submission to all laws, which may be made in a land; for some are so wicked, oppressive and unjust in their nature and tendency, that the best of men have thought it their indispensable duty to disobey them.

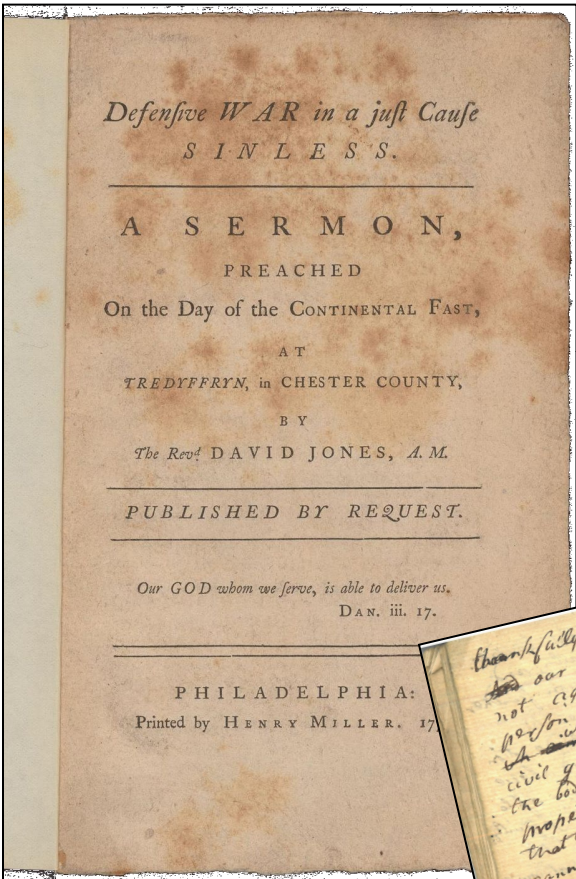


Partial transcription of the extract above: In Congress Nov 4, 1775

Resolved, That the new army intended to lie before Boston consist of 20 372 men, officers included.

Dec 7

Resolved, that the said resolution shall not extend or be construed to authorize the general to call forth the said minute men or militia without having applied to and obtained the consent of these officers, in whom the executive powers of government may be vested.



Rev. David Jones (1736-1820)

- 1736: born in Delaware colony
- 1758: baptized
- 1762: married Anne Stilwell
- 1766: ordained as pastor of Freehold Baptist Church (New Jersey)
- 1772-1773: mission to Native Americans (Ohio territory)
- 1775: pastor to Great Valley Church, Chester (Pennsylvania)
- 1775: preaches "Defensive War in a Just Cause Sinless"
- 1776: appointed chaplain in Col St. Clair's regiment
- 1794: succeeded John Hurt as Chaplain of the Army
- 1800: discharged
- 1812: volunteered for the army in war with Britain, Jones was 76 years old; appointed chaplain by Secretary of War, Gen. John Armstrong



(Continued from page 1)

along with five Baptist laymen, Levi Bishop, Matthew Bishop, Capt. Joseph Cole, Hugh Cole, and James Pierce, became part of a group of over one thousand patriots known as the Overmountain Men. Col. William Campbell of Washington Co., VA assembled volunteers from Southwestern Virginia on the Muster Grounds near Abingdon, VA. On October 7, 1780, the Overmountain Men, under the command of Col. Campbell, surprised the British who were atop King's Mountain, SC by attacking them from all sides and subduing them in only one hour. "Sir Henry Clinton aptly described the situation when he said it was 'the first link of a chain of evils that followed each other in regular succession until they at last ended in the total loss of America'."⁵

Woolsey's dedication to the patriot cause may be seen in that he cut his son, Zephaniah, out of his will. While the reason for Thomas's snub of his son is uncertain, it is believed that father and son fell out over the fact that Zephaniah had Tory leanings as evidenced by his support of Francis and William Hopkins, notorious local supporters of the English crown.⁶

Woolsey is buried at River Bend Cemetery, the old Maiden Cemetery, near the site of his pioneer home. His grave is believed to have been marked only by a crude stone until around 1910 when the current stone was erected by the Britton family who lived nearby. The stone simply reads: "Rev. T. W. Wolsey; A Pioneer Baptist Minister; Died - 1794."

While Rev. Thomas W. Woolsey and his fellow Baptist pioneers in Southwestern Virginia are not well-known today, it is clear that they were patriots of the American Revolution as participants with the Overmountain Men in the fight for American liberty at King's Mountain. Baptists today must not easily surrender the liberties for which these patriot pioneers fought. As Baptists, we must continue to guard religious liberty for all people. We must fight against any establishment or favoritism on the part of our government for or against any religion or even for no religion at all. We must muster for religious liberty to ensure that future generations continue to enjoy this fundamental freedom for all people.

1. William S. Simpson, *Virginia Baptist ministers, 1760-1790: a biographical survey* (Richmond, VA: W.S. Simpson, c1990-2002, 2004), 124.

2. Garnett Ryland, unpublished research notes of Garnett Ryland c. 1959 based on his review of the minutes of Smith and Linville's Creek church, pp 20-21. Ryland's notes are available in the archives of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Richmond, VA. The original and a typed copy of *Smith's Creek Minute Book of the Church meeting on Smith's Creek, 1756-1774, and on Lynville Creek, 1775-77, 1787-1818* is available in the archives of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

3. "St. Clair's Bottom Primitive Baptist Church," unpublished church history posted inside the church.

4. Jack and Rubinette Niemann, eds., *Washington County, Virginia Surveyors Record 1781-1797*, copied by Rhonda Robertson, 1998 and Indexed by Jack & Rubinette Niemann (Historical Society Washington Co., VA, 2004), 68; In the archives of the Historical Society of Washington Co, VA in STA.VA.Wash.351.

5. William Cox, *Battle of Kings Mountain Participants: October 7, 1780*, reprint (Abingdon, VA: Historical Society of Washington County, VA, 1972), 8.

6. Gordon Aronhime, "Thomas Wolsey - Bristol Area's First Minister," Bristol Herald Courier, February 17, 1963

Rev. Dr. Bill Bryan serves on the Religious Liberty Committee of the Baptist General Association of Virginia. BBryan@AbingdonBaptist.org

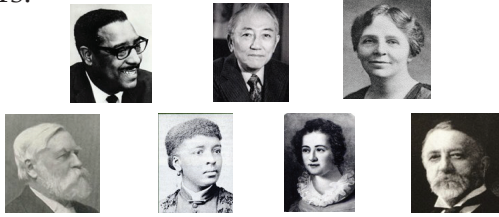
Research Snapshot – Melvin Foster

Dr. Melvin Foster, Professor of Voice and Associate Provost for Academic Success at Morehouse College, visited ABHS to research Rev. Dr. Henry Lyman Morehouse for a Juneteenth keynote address at the University of Rochester. His research explored the connection between Morehouse and the concept of the "Talented Tenth," often attributed to W.E.B. Du Bois. While he did not locate direct evidence of the specific quote he sought, Dr. Foster gained valuable insight into the American Baptist Home Mission Society's longstanding commitment to expanding educational opportunities and supporting minority communities through education. Reflecting on his visit, he described the experience as "pretty fruitful."



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★ pair of tickets to ABHS Biennial event	
Samuel DeWitt Proctor Circle	\$501-1000
★ benefits listed above, plus	
★ Baptist history publication -- potluck!	
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INSIDE:
Revolutionary Baptists

Torbet Essay Contest: Baptist History Open for Submissions

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION:

- ★ Author has not already published a major scholarly work;
- ★ Submissions make a unique contribution to the field of Baptist history and/or theology;
- ★ Professional and academic writing standards are met, especially re: attributions and citations;
- ★ Citations, format, and style must follow latest edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*;
- ★ Maximum length: 25 double-spaced pages (excluding notes);
- ★ Submission must be 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 early-career 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 Baptist Seminary (1944-52), served as director of educational services for the American Baptist Board of Education and Publication (1952-58), as dean and church history professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary (1958-67), and as ABCUSA Associate General Secretary for Ecumenical Relations (1967-77). In recognition of his contributions to Baptist research and publication, ABHS established this prize to encourage development of early-career scholars in the field of Baptist history studies.