

CELEBRATING 400 YEARS OF BEING BAPTIST *Baptist Beginnings, 1639*

America's democratic and pluralistic roots were first introduced in the New World in the 1630s. Peeling back the layers of history, one person emerges as central in the formulation of America's foundations: Roger Williams. Little recognized, the story of Baptists in America is the story of American beginnings, with Williams at the center of both.

A former lawyer-turned-clergyman, Williams fled the Old World for the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631, where as a contrarian Separatist within the Church of England, he became increasingly critical of the merger of church and state. For five years, he modeled a radical faith focused upon liberty of conscience, acceptance and respect of persons of other faith, and opposition to state-supported religion. Finally, in 1636, the nettlesome Williams was labeled as a heretic and banished from Massachusetts.

Williams's travails paved the way for his establishment of a new colony, Rhode Island. Modeled on the principles that, some 140 years later, would become the basis for a new nation, the new colony espoused democracy, pluralism, religious freedom, and separation of church and state. For Williams, these principles embodied the fledgling Baptist faith of which he had known of in England, and in 1639, embracing believer's baptism, he established the first Baptist church in the New World. Existing yet today, the First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, is the beginning point for Baptists in America.

While Williams later left the church, colonial Baptists, despite long and intense persecution, carried forward his principles. These Baptists, as was true of Baptists in England, were ridiculed for rejecting infant baptism and heralding religious liberty, but because they were far from the center of Anglican power, they had more opportunities to assert their principles.

Generations of persecution passed and eventually that which Williams planted upon the shores of the New World matured into the foundations of the American nation. Today, his legacy also permeates Baptist life, embedded in our central practices of believer's baptism and liberty of conscience and in our core beliefs of religious liberty and church-state separation.



Roger Williams

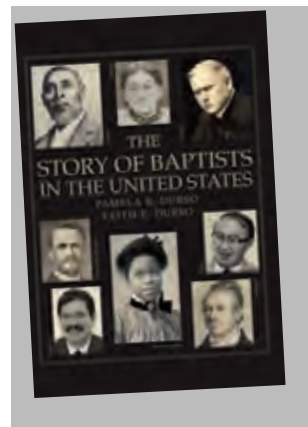


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This bulletin insert is the second of twelve to be provided monthly during 2009 by the Baptist History and Heritage Society and The Center for Baptist Studies. The article was written by Bruce T. Gourley, interim director of The Center for Baptist Studies, Mercer University.