

# Religious Freedom Article

By: Dan Carlton, Roger Clatterbuck & Joyce Beales

Religious freedom, one of our foundational principles, emerged in the early days of our country right here in Culpeper, VA. To most early Americans, religious liberty was an unknown concept. Churches in the majority of the colonies, following the customs of their European cousins, were state-sponsored, and members of the clergy were supported from taxes levied upon citizens. Religious dissenters were dealt with quickly and often crudely. The Act of Toleration, passed in 1689 by Parliament and later applied to the colonies, provided a way for people to preach and practice their religion differently from the Anglican Church. Baptists saw their right to preach as a God-given commission; they did not wish to be “tolerated” by anyone. Culpeper was not very friendly toward Baptists and considered them to be dissenters. Ten prominent Baptist preachers, among them James Ireland, Elijah Craig, John Pickett, and William McClannahan, were jailed in Culpeper for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ireland, a young Baptist preacher in his early twenties, was imprisoned and tortured five months in the Culpeper jail located at that time on the corner of East and Davis Streets. Nathaniel Saunders, another local pastor, showed remarkable courage to co-sponsor the Mt. Poney Baptist Church in Culpeper. He, too, was later imprisoned in Culpeper jail in September of 1773. Perhaps no single fact in early Virginia Baptist history is more widely known than that the third meeting house of the Mt. Poney-Culpeper Baptist Church was built on the site of that old colonial jail. John Leland served as pastor of the Mt. Poney Church from 1777-1778. He was intensely interested in religious liberty.



*Actual lock and key from Culpeper Jail currently on display at Virginia Baptist Historical Society at University of Richmond*

A friend and ally to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, Leland’s influence was an important factor in winning the rank and file of Virginia’s population to support Jefferson’s bill for the complete separation of church and state. He played a decisive role in the formulation of the Constitution’s religious liberty provisions and recognition that Baptists generally “sought liberty of conscience for all men.” He made a substantial contribution in molding an American tradition—the separation of church and state. In Virginia, Baptist preachers were regularly thrown into prison as drifters and vagabonds. Angry mobs broke up their services and went unpunished by the magistrates. Their petitions to the legislature for relief from this discrimination were largely ignored. Much of Leland’s career as a Baptist evangelist was expended in fighting to remove these barriers—not only for Baptists but for persons

of all faiths— Christian and non-Christian, and even for those who held no recognized religious faith at all. Leland played a considerable role in James Madison’s election to the Virginia Ratifying Convention in March, 1788 and to the First Congress in February, 1789. Those elections, in turn, were key events in the ratification of the Constitution and in the adoption of the Bill of Rights. Leland in early 1789, encouraged Baptists to vote for James Madison for Congress so that he might propose what became the First Amendment. Religious freedom is still a foundational value for our country today. In Culpeper we need only walk down to the corner of East and Davis Streets where the colonial Culpeper jail once stood or ride by Mt. Poney to remind ourselves of the significant history that happened here in our community.

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