

Kathy Hillman: Independence Day, political freedom & religious liberty

June 29, 2015

Brilliant red, white and blue fireworks lit the night. Strains of the 1812 Overture echoed across the water. The sky glowed as cannons volleyed and church bells rang. But that memorable evening, I wasn't watching on television. Mother and I experienced the scene overlooking Boston Harbor.



Kathy Hillman Earlier, we joined throngs along the Charles River, where we glimpsed the bright stars and prominent flag in the Hatch Shell. We heard the Boston Pops pay tribute to that long-ago day when the Continental Congress approved the final wording of the Declaration of Independence. The colonies may have declared independence from King George III and England on July 4, 1776, but much work had yet to be done—a war won, a nation born and liberty ensured.

True, many colonists traveled to the New World in a quest for greater religious freedom. Yet nonconformists and dissenters faced persecution.

In Puritan-established Massachusetts, Baptist Obadiah Holmes was flogged publicly for holding an illegal meeting. Because they were banished, Anne

Hutchinson and Roger Williams founded Rhode Island, where Williams established the first Baptist church on the continent.



Baptist Obadiah Holmes was flogged for holding an illegal meeting. (Illustration courtesy of the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, taken from *Tales of Baptist Daring*, by Benjamin P. Browne, illustrations by William Hamilton, published by Judson Press, 1961, page 27) Harvard's first president, Henry Dunster, refused to have his infant son baptized and lost his position. Officials in Boston denied Baptists use of a meetinghouse they built. In Virginia, evangelists were routinely fined, whipped or jailed. Paying taxes to support the established church caused constant conflict, as did the requirement to obtain preaching licenses.

Eventually, as more settlers arrived, religious tolerance increased. By the signing of the Declaration of Independence, nearly 500 Baptist congregations existed. Most Baptists viewed the battle for civil independence and the fight for religious liberty as one struggle. Many fought and died. However, winning the war guaranteed only political sovereignty. Questions of religious sovereignty remained.

Some denominations favored establishment, meaning the government supported one religion over another. For pastor John Leland of Virginia and other Baptists, the answer was a clear Baptist distinctive. Church and state should be separate, but the state should guarantee religious liberty.



James Madison meets with John Leland. (Illustration by Edwin M. Hearne Jr., courtesy of the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.) Public school students study the U.S. Constitution and by law participate in Celebrate Freedom Week. In Texas, the event coincides with Constitution Day, Sept. 17. Perhaps some, as did our children, must memorize the preamble. After assisting Marshall, Michael and Holly, I still can recite those historic words.

On Sept. 17, 1787, the Constitutional Convention signed the document members drafted, debated and amended. The Constitution became the official governing document of the United States of America with New Hampshire's ratification June 21, 1788.

Baptists felt the Constitution fell short. The only mention of religious freedom came in Article VI: “but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust.” For different reasons, Leland, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson believed in what Jefferson would later call “building a wall of separation between church and state.”



(Photo by Kathy Hillman)Leland considered running for Congress against Madison. Instead, the two exchanged promises.

J.M. Dawson, Texas Baptist pastor and founding executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, participated in the dedication of the Leland-Madison Monumental Park in Virginia, which commemorates that history-changing meeting. Below a bas-relief of John Leland (1754-1841), an inscription tells the story:

Elder John Leland
Courageous leader of

The Baptist doctrine

Ardent advocate of the principles

Of democracy

Vindicator of separation

Of church and state.

Near this spot in 1788, Elder John Leland and

James Madison, the father of the American

Constitution, held a significant interview

Which resulted in the adoption of the

Constitution by Virginia. Then Madison,

A member of Congress from Orange, presented

The First Amendment to the Constitution

Guaranteeing religious liberty, free speech and

A free press. This satisfied Leland and his

Baptist followers.

As agreed, Representative Madison introduced a resolution creating the Bill of Rights. The first part of the First Amendment prohibits “establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” In December 1791, the Bill of Rights officially became effective, adding religious liberty as the twin of political independence.

This Fourth of July, we’ll proudly fly the Stars and Stripes and watch the annual Woodway parade from our lawn. We’ll close the day with patriotic music and a fireworks display. As the *1812 Overture* reaches its peak, we’ll hear cannons and church bells, simultaneous symbols of political sovereignty and religious liberty. Twins, two sides of the same coin, and an important Baptist distinctive that we’ll explore together at the

**Texas
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2015 Texas Baptist annual meeting.

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