It is true….our forefathers came to America beginning in the early 1600’s in search of religious liberty. What most Americans do not know is that religious liberty was not firmly established until the Bill of Rights and the Constitution were signed in 1783. The grit, determination, and bravery of our Baptist forefathers to come to America was amazing. They put convictions ahead of convenience and conscience ahead of comfort.

The conditions in England, Wales, and Scotland had become unbearable for anyone who dared to separate from the Church of England or the State Church. All dissent was met with harsh physical, vocational, and social persecution and hardship. King James I, the King that authorized the King James Bible, was determined to rid England of any and all dissenters. His son, King Charles I, continued the ruinous reign of his father and forced multitudes of England’s finest citizens to the docks to board ships to flee the persecution for the new world.

One such example was a Baptist pastor named Abel Morgan who left Wales for the shores of America with his wife and son on September 28, 1710. Here is a brief travel log of his journey:

Departure from Bristol – Sept.28, 1710 – encountered high winds and rough seas. Forced to return to Milford Haven and remained there three weeks.

Departure from Milford Haven and driven by winds to Cork Island. Did not sail for 5 weeks. Most of the passengers were sick and could not travel.

Departed from Cork Island on November 19.

December 14 – Very sad day for Priscilla (his wife) and me…..”Boy” Morgan (their infant son) died and was buried at sea.

December 19 – A most grievous day. My dear wife, Priscilla, departed this life to enter our Lord’s presence. Buried at sea.

February 14, 1711 – Arrived in America.

Those who left their homes in England and other nations for the new world in hopes of finding religious freedom had their dreams quickly dashed upon arrival. The Puritans that came to these shores were loyal to the established church from England and had established the same harsh punishments in the new world for new arrivals that did not support “the Church”. Baptists were most often in the grip of the tormentors because they refused to be subject to the very treatment that caused them to come to America in the first place.

**ROGER WILLIAMS -**

One of the great champions for Baptists and one who fought valiantly for religious freedom in America was Roger Williams. Williams had been a dissenter in England and was even more vigorous in his dissent once he arrived in America in 1631 to face the same harsh treatment. He
was a brilliant man, very scholarly, and extremely conscientious. By 1636, Williams had been banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony. Two years later, he formed the first democratic government in the new world… Providence Plantations…which is today, Rhode Island.

From the days of his arrival in the new world, he was convicted that his baptism was invalid having only experienced “baptism” as an infant. But where could he find someone in a church that would baptize him properly? He could not find such a pastor or church. So, he called on one of his church members, Ezekiel Holiman, to baptize him. Then, Roger Williams baptized Mr. Holiman and 10 other members of his church. In that moment, Williams formed the “first” Baptist church on American soil.

JOHN CLARKE –

Mr. Clarke arrived in Boston in 1637. He likewise formed a colony in the region of Roger Williams and in the area that is now Newport, RI. In 1644, he formed a Baptist church there. Clarke was not exempt from persecution as a Baptist either. In 1651, John Clarke along with John Crandall and Obadiah Holmes (all from the Newport Church) traveled to Lynn, MA. The purpose of their visit was to call on a man that was one of their aged friends. While John Clarke was preaching in the man’s living room on Sunday morning, soldiers burst in to arrest Clarke, Crandall, and Holmes. The three were charged before a judge with holding an unauthorized meeting. They had fines assessed and were thrown in jail. Crandall and Clarke were released when some friends paid their fines. Holmes was not so fortunate. Since no one stepped forward to pay his fine, he was removed from prison on Sept. 6, 1651. He was taken to a public spot in the city street of Boston and whipped thoroughly for preaching in a home without the approval of the State Church.

HENRY DUNSTER –

Dunster was the first President of Harvard. He was a highly respected academician and a leading citizen in the city of Boston. When his fourth child was born in 1653, he announced that he believed that it was wrong to baptize an infant. He stated that he believed that baptism was to be done for believers only that had fully professed faith in Jesus Christ personally. As a result of this “radical view”, he was forced out as President of Harvard, banished from Boston, and died six years later in poverty and disrepute in 1659.

WILLIAM SCREVEN –

Mr. Screven immigrated to America and arrived in Kittery, Maine. Shortly after arriving, he embraced Baptist beliefs. In June, 1681, he was baptized in a Baptist church in Boston in 1683. The group soon fled from Maine due to the harsh treatment that they were receiving. Rather than
go to Rhode Island, they fled south and formed the first Baptist church in the south in Charleston, South Carolina.

**Pennsylvania: Place of Refuge –**

In the last 20 years of the 1600’s, Baptists grew in number and in the number of congregations. The more they grew, the more visible they were. That put them on the radar of the established church and thus, brought even more persecution. So, Baptist people were looking for places where they could worship without persecution. Pennsylvania opened its arms to all of those seeking freedom. The first Baptist church in Pennsylvania formed in Pennepek (which is now a part of Philadelphia). Baptists from various nations migrated there….the groups that were most frequently arriving were those from Ireland, Scotland, and England. The church at Pennepek got their first pastor in a most unusual manner. A young man in need of a job to provide food and clothing was “invited to preach”…..here is the story of the first pastor of Pennepek Church…..

The story of its organization is a remarkable one. Elias Keach son of the celebrated Benjamin Keach, of London, a Baptist minister and author, arrived in Philadelphia in 1686. He was "a very wild young spark," plucky, talented, audacious, and well posted on Biblical quotations and theological phrases. For the purpose of obtaining amusement he dressed in black, wore a band, and pretended to be a minister. As clergymen of all denominations were scarce, he soon had an invitation to preach "in the house of a Baptist at Lower Dublin."

A large congregation assembled, and he began to preach, and, says Rev. Morgan Edwards, "he performed well enough until he had advanced pretty far into the sermon; then, stopping short, he looked like a man astonished. The audience concluded that he had been seized with a sudden disorder; but, on asking what the matter was, received from him a confession of the imposture, with tears in his eyes and much trembling. Great was his distress, though it ended happily, for from this time he dated his conversion.

He heard there was a Baptist minister at Cold Spring, in Bucks County, between Bristol and Trenton. To him did he repair to seek counsel and comfort, and by him was he baptized. In January, 1688, he formed a church of twelve persons at Pennepek, and became their minister.

(This was taken from: AN AMERICAN FAMILY HISTORY: THE PENNEPEK BAPTIST CHURCH – THE EARLY YEARS http://www.anamericanfamilyhistory.com/Watts%20Family/ Pennepek%20Baptist%20Church.html).

Though the lure to America had been the hope of living in religious freedom, the reality was far from that. In fact, religious persecution in America would last for many years. It was not fully secured until the signing of the Constitution in 1783 even though the first settlement in Jamestown had been established in 1608. That is a long time for “religious freedom” to be granted and established to be the law of the land. Between 1768 and 1777, it was noted that 83 Baptist preachers suffered persecution and 44 of them served prison terms for not being loyal to the Church of England.

**Revival Comes to America…..**
Then as now, America needed a strong movement of God to shake us from our infighting, divisions, and persecution of others of differing religious views. In the 1730’s, God began a work in England and in this struggling nation that would be later called, the First Great Awakening. It affected those churches that were not in any way linked to the Church of England or to the Roman Catholics. It was led by the Congregationalists and Presbyterians that were the first to experience God doing a “new thing” in their midst.

**GEORGE WHITFIELD**

This nation was growing slowly but surely. However, the sad practices of religious oppression from the “old country” were being re-established on our shores. Although many had immigrated to a new home in America, the hope of living in religious freedom was not being realized in the major areas of settlers. Those Baptist people longing for free exercise of religion were migrating to less settled areas in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and even south to establish faith communities. America was not in position to offer true religious freedom everywhere. Something needed to change the hearts and minds of the new settlers.

That “something” came from the hand of God. In the 1730’s and 40’s, a movement of God’s Spirit began to sweep across England and was brought to America by the bold preaching of George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley. All were powerful communicators, but none matched the voice and fervor of Whitefield. He was a short man, cross-eyed (which people thought was a mark of God’s hand upon him), and had a booming voice. Benjamin Franklin, though not a Christian but a Deist, admired the intellect and delivery of Whitefield. In Boston, Franklin went to hear him preach. It was Franklin that reported after his careful mathematic calculation of the “distance from Whitefield to the back of the crowd and the measurement of the crowd’s size” that Whitefield spoke to 30,000 people in one sermon at one time in Boston! It was recorded by another person that Whitefield could be easily heard 500 feet from a podium (a football field is 300 feet!). Remember that this was a time before any type of voice magnification or microphones!

Whitefield came to Savannah, Georgia as a parish priest of the Anglican Church in 1738 at the age of 24. He would make 13 crossings before he would die in Massachusetts in 1770 at the age of 55. He was a firebrand and his journeys up and down the East Coast set the new world ablaze with the message of the Gospel. Though he was a Calvinist, his appeals were not “closed” to preaching only to the elect. His meetings were like Billy Graham crusades. His style was filled with pathos, emotion, and conviction. His message was clear and the impact was to make all aware of their personal responsibility to be converted through a personal repentance and trust in Jesus, to live righteously before God and man, and to realize that one has true freedom in Jesus Christ because that person is accountable to God “only” in matters of morality, faith, and conscience.

That message took the new world by storm. As it echoed through the outposts of civilization that were widely scattered in this new land, each settlement became a “fire” burning brightly that men should be able to worship God freely and live freely out from under the control of a state church or an earthly king. The timing was strategic. What was happening in the 1730’s and 40’s from the open air meetings of Whitefield became the foundation of the American Revolution in
1776. The Gospel was at the heart of men’s desire to live free in religion, relationships, and as a republic.

As you might expect, not all Baptists or colonists were in support of Whitefield or of the Wesley’s meetings. Many labeled what was happening a purely emotional hype. The more staid Baptists and “high church settlers” thought that church and Christianity should be much more formal and that meeting outside in the open air, shouting support of the preaching, singing and having any kind of visible enthusiasm for the worship services was totally carnal.

But no one could deny the impact of this event across America. The morality, compassion, and “atmosphere” changed. It was reported that in many places, people could be heard in the early evening singing with their family in a time of household devotions. Bible reading was common. Conversations about God and the things of God were happening everywhere. This nation was not fully Christian, but the evidences of Christianity were everywhere.

Out of this Awakening came some of the great preachers of the 18th century. One of those was a man by the name of Shubal Stearns who became a Baptist in 1751. Stearns launched his ministry in the South as he traveled down the Alleghany Valley. He settle in North Carolina and planted a church at the intersection of two immigrant trails. The church was named Sandy Creek Baptist Church.

*The pioneer Baptist historian in America, Morgan Edwards, remarked of this Sandy Creek Church that she “spread her branches southward as far as Georgia; eastward, to the sea and Chesapeake Bay; and northward, to the waters of the Potomac. It, in seventeen years, became mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, to 42 churches, from which sprung 125 ministers”.*

*This church had great branches spreading westward into the new states being formed. The spirit of evangelism which characterized Stearns and others and their followers gave considerable impetus to the continuous growth of Baptists in the South.*

*The revival which was begun by the earnest preaching of these men and others continued in Virginia and the Carolinas throughout the American Revolution. Baptists in all the colonies increased rapidly. In New England, Baptist churches increased from 21 to 78 between the beginning of the revival until the revolution. By 1784 Virginia had 151 Baptist churches, in addition to supplying Baptists for over forty churches in Kentucky; North Carolina had 43 churches, South Carolina had 27; and Georgia, where the first Baptist church was organized by Daniel Marshall in 1772, had 6 churches by 1784.* (Copied from Baker’s book, p.62-63).

(This material was taken from THE BAPTIST MARCH IN HISTORY, by Robert A. Baker, Convention Press, Nashville, TN, 1958, pages 57-71).