

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

JOHN CLARKE BAPTIST FREEDOM FIGHTER



Who: John Clarke

Where: England, then Boston and Newport in the new colonies

When: 1609-1676

What he did: Worked for religious freedom in the new colonies

No one is quite sure of when John Clarke became a Baptist, or why he began to accept Baptist views, but Baptists are thankful that he did. John, who was born into a family who attended the Church of England, eventually became a Baptist and remained a faithful Baptist for more than forty years. In those forty years, he did more for Baptist history than most Baptists do in a lifetime.

John was born in England in 1609, the same year that John Smyth and Thomas Helwys started the Baptist movement by separating from the Church of England.

As a baby, John was baptized in the Church of England. He probably grew up in Holland and was well-educated at the University of Leyden. Little is known about his early life. But when he was about thirty years old, he moved to Boston, a city in the new English colonies.

Along with his wife, Elizabeth, John arrived in Boston

in the middle of a troubling time. They had left England because they wanted to escape the **religious persecution** going on there. In England, the government required that all citizens be members of the Church of England. Citizens were not allowed to express their disagreement with the church or its leaders. Since some of John's views differed from those of the church, he was not free to worship as he

Religious persecution

is the unfair treatment of a person or group of people because of their religious beliefs or practices. Religious persecution can take the form of physical punishment or other forms of discrimination.

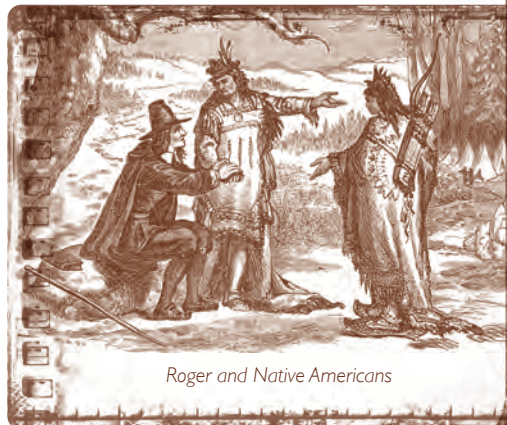
wished. Moving to the new colonies, he thought, would give him the chance to experience religious freedom.

When the Clarkes arrived in Boston, they found trouble brewing. A woman named Anne Hutchinson had begun questioning the teachings of the town's minister. She disagreed with his understanding of the Bible, and she taught her own personal interpretations of scripture to people who gathered at her home. John did not agree with all that Hutchinson taught. He did agree that she had a right to differ from the minister and to try to understand the Bible

for herself. John joined Anne's group because he believed in religious freedom.

John was disappointed to find that the religious people of the colonies did not allow much freedom to disagree with the popular religious views, either. Imagine his disappointment. He had come all the way from England to find freedom, but full freedom was not found in the new land! John wrote that he was not surprised to see people disagree about God and religious matters. He was upset, however, that they "were not able to so to bear with each other in their different understandings and consciences, and. . .to live peaceably together." John declared that one year of religious persecution was enough for him. He and Elizabeth decided to create a new place where people could come and have full freedom of thought and religious belief.

In the spring of 1638, John and a group of fellow colonists set out for the settlement of Providence. Roger Williams had established that settlement, which offered religious freedom, and Roger within the next year founded the first Baptist church in America in Providence. When John arrived in Providence, Roger helped him purchase an island on which to begin a new



Roger and Native Americans



town. By 1639, John had founded the town of Newport, located in the area that later became Rhode Island.

Within a few years, John and his group organized a church in Newport. John became the minister of this Baptist church, which was only the second Baptist church formed in the colonies.

He opened the doors of the church for any people who looked for religious freedom.

By 1648, the church practiced believer's baptism by immersion, meaning that believers' entire bodies were dipped into the water. The Newport church may have been the first one in the colonies to baptize by immersion. John served as pastor of the Newport church for forty years. He also served as the town doctor, treating people with medicine along with the Bible and prayer.

In 1651, John experienced one of the most memorable events of his life. Along with his assistant pastor, Obadiah Holmes, and another member of his church, John Randall, John traveled to Massachusetts to the home of William Witter, a blind man. During the visit with William, John began to preach to William and the neighbors who had gathered there. When the word got out that John was preaching against infant baptism, the practice of the government's church, John and his friends were arrested and thrown in jail.

The men stayed in prison for ten days before their trial. John and Obadiah refused to pay the fine they

were charged, believing they had done nothing wrong. An unknown supporter paid John's fine. **Obadiah Holmes** refused to have his fine paid. Instead, he took a terrible beating for his punishment. Had someone not paid John's fine for him, he would have faced the same harsh whipping.

While John was in England, he wrote a book called *Ill Newes from New England*. He told the story of the incident in Boston and the whipping of Obadiah Holmes. John's work significantly influenced the people in England and in the colonies as it described the punishment of those seeking religious liberty. He wrote that scripture does not give anyone power to take away freedom from others, and that only the Holy Spirit can guide one's values. Religious liberty, he believed, is a right given by God that cannot be taken away by humans.

In *Ill Newes from New England*, John Clarke told of the whipping of **Obadiah Holmes**. Obadiah's hands were tied to a stake, and he was stripped to the waist. The "whipper" struck him thirty times across the back with a three-corded whip. As he was beaten, Obadiah continued to preach to the crowd. He said he had a sense of God's presence like he had never had before. The pain was removed from him so that the beating seemed easy. When they untied him from the post, he had joyfulness in his heart and cheerfulness in his face. He told those who sentenced him, "You have struck me as with roses." Obadiah was injured so badly that he was unable to leave Boston for several weeks, and his back bore the scars of his beating for the rest of his life.

ALL NEWES
FROM
NEW-ENGLAND:
OR
A Narrative of *New-Englands*
PERSECUTION.

WHEREIN IS DECLARED

That while old *England* is becoming new,
New-England is become Old.

Also four Proposals to the Honoured Parliament and
Council of State, touching the way to *Propagate*
the Gospel of Christ (with small charge
and great safety) both in Old
England and New.

Also four conclusions touching the faith and order of the
Gospel of Christ out of his last Will and
Testament, confirmed and justified.

By JOHN CLARK Physician of Rhode Island in America.

*Revil. 2. 35. Hold fast till I come.
2. 11. Behold I come quickly.
22. 30. Amen, even so come Lord Jesus.*

LONDON,

Printed by Henry Hills living in Fleet-Yard next door to the *Ross*
and *Crown*, in the year 1692.

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In *Ill Newes from New England*, John also defended the Baptist practice of believer's baptism, the idea that only those who are able to believe in Jesus Christ for themselves should be baptized. He also wrote that baptism by immersion, or dipping in water, is a symbol of Christ's death and resurrection, as baptism pictures one being buried and rising to new life. *Ill Newes* was a bold and courageous statement for Baptists who believed strongly in believer's baptism by immersion

and in religious liberty.

John Clarke's portrait holds a special place in Baptist history. As a doctor, he shared God's love by offering medical attention as well as prayer for his patients. He served as pastor of the second Baptist church in the colonies. He worked to obtain the first charter that granted full religious liberty. He wrote a book that influenced people in England and in the colonies to understand the Baptist ideas of religious liberty and believer's baptism by immersion. Now Baptists are challenged to remember these freedoms that John Clarke dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve.

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STORIES OF BAPTIST HEROES

Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.