

Rhode Island Baptist Heritage Center

The coronavirus pandemic terminated the Baptist Heritage Center activities for nearly the entire year. The final two sessions of the biennial course in Baptist Polity and History occurred on January 11 and February 29—less than two weeks before the governor ordered the shutdown of meetings. Then our biennial Baptist Heritage Weekend, scheduled for November 7 and 8, had to be cancelled altogether. Baptist records that we collected have not been deposited at the John Hay Library at Brown University because the library has been closed, as well.

The polity course kicked off for its four all-day sessions on September 21, 2019, at Tefft Chapel at Canonicutus with an enrollment of sixteen students, both lay people and those working toward ordination. Such a course is a requirement for ordination and is recognized by ABCORI and TABCOM (Massachusetts). The students included six lay people, but one of them switched to the full course requirements after the first session. Again, we had four instructors: Stanley Lemons on Baptist history, Jonathan Malone on theology, Johnny Wilson on the Black church, and Charles Hartman on Baptist practices.

In alternate years the BHC has staged a “Baptist Heritage Weekend,” and 2020 would have been the sixth time. We had secured Dr. Curtis Freeman, director of the Baptist House at Duke University, as our principal figure. Greenville Baptist Church had agreed to host our Saturday session, and the First Baptist Church in America had opened its pulpit to Freeman on Sunday. In addition, Adrienne Weimer, a professor at Providence College, was to join with Freeman in an afternoon session discussing Baptist dissent. Alas, it all fell victim to the pandemic. The only remnant was Curtis Freeman’s preaching by video for the morning worship service of FBCIA on November 8.

Before the pandemic closed everything, we had collected records from the Niantic Baptist Church and miscellaneous items, including the first annual report of the Woman’s Baptist Missionary Society of Rhode Island (1885), a 25th anniversary booklet of the Spring Green Memorial Church (1974), a 100th anniversary booklet of the First Free Baptist Church of Olneyville (1928), annual programs of the Narragansett Baptist Association (1955-1961), a book by A. D. Williams, *The Rhode Island Freewill Baptist Pulpit* (1852), among other things. We were given a memoir by Rev. John A. Kearns, the final pastor of the South Baptist Church of Providence, in which he tells the story of South’s final years. His material included a typescript copy, pictures, and a CD. The First Baptist Church of East Greenwich donated a box

of sermons preached by Rev. Harry Bronkar, dating from 1986 to 1991; Sunday school records going back to 1888; and miscellaneous file folders related to various committees, newsletters, and services. When we are given the green light by the John Hay, all of these items will be placed in permanent, safe storage and available to anyone wishes to see them.

The *American Baptist Quarterly* will publish an issue specifically devoted to topics involving Rhode Island Baptists, and the BHC greatly supported that effort. While Curtis Freeman is the general editor of the journal, Jonathan Malone was the guest editor of the Rhode Island issue, and he wrote an article that will appear in a later edition of the *ABQ*. Stanley Lemons wrote two other articles and prepared another for publication that was originally written by Rev. Don Rasmussen.

Events have reduced the board of directors of the BHC to a skeleton crew. A couple of board members declined re-nomination in 2019, our vice president retired in 2019, our president expectantly resigned in 2020, Rev. Tom McKibbens was felled with a heart attack, and three or four individuals who were approached declined to serve. Nevertheless, the BHC continues, and we hope that new people will join our board. If you are passionate about the Baptist heritage and witness, please join us. Contact Jonathan Malone, Stanley Lemons, or Don Waterman.

We stand ready to help churches in preserving their records. If your church wants a permanent, safe place for your precious church records, we will gladly transfer them to the John Hay to join the Baptist Heritage Center collection there. You may call Stanley Lemons or Jonathan Malone in that regard. We are planning for the seventh presentation of the Baptist polity and history course in the fall of 2021. Johnny Wilson has left Rhode Island for a church in Massachusetts, and Michael Browner will be our instructor in the history and practices of the Black church. Charles Hartman resigned, and Kathryn Palen agreed to lead the part of the course dealing with Baptist practices.