There have been Baptists in Virginia for a long, long time. Over three centuries ago in May 1714, English Baptists appointed two “messengers” to go to the Virginia Colony “with all Convenient Speed.”

Robert Norden, a minister from County Kent in southeastern England, gathered some Baptists who were living along the south side of the James River near present Hopewell and planted what traditionally has been held to have been the first Baptist church in Virginia.

There are several remarkable findings about the early church plant. First, the impetus began within Virginia. There were some Baptists, likely from Kent, who had settled in Virginia and they were the ones who sent word back home to send a minister.

Second, the cause was advanced first by an individual church, the Baptist church at Canterbury, the ancient cathedral town, and by the Baptist association in Kent. These former neighbors to the Virginians advocated for the sending of a minister and they collected funds for the effort.

Third, the organized denominational body – the General Assembly of General Baptists – accepted the appeal from the grassroots in Kent and endorsed the mission. Never underestimate the power and influence of individuals, a church (or two or three) and a local association!
Fifty years after the first church, there were enough Baptists in the colony to constitute a threat to the Established Church and, therefore, for a period of 10 years (1768–1778), there were numerous overt acts of persecution against the Virginia Baptists.

The Baptists prevailed. They faced their persecutors with an early display of what we now call “non-violence.” They endured but not as beaten chattel. They held their heads high, accepted imprisonment, experienced social ridicule and at the end of the period of persecution they had gained in public sympathy. Within a few more years, they claimed religious liberty as an earned prize when they lobbied to have it placed into the documents of Virginia and the New Republic.

The three centuries of a Baptist witness in Virginia has produced a tremendous influence for good. Across the years there have been thousands of churches which have worn the Baptist name and countless thousands of converts to Christianity through those churches. And to think it all started because a few individuals who had settled in Virginia wanted a minister and desired to unite as a congregation of Baptist believers.

Fred Anderson, executive director of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, is retiring in June 2017 after serving for 38 years. We’re sharing a few of his adapted stories about Virginia Baptists’ rich legacy. For the full stories, visit BGAV.org/Fred.