

The Mammoth Cheese

BY STEPHEN STOOKEY | *Dallas Baptist University*

What is an appropriate gift for a group of Baptists to present a newly elected president of the United States? Would a mammoth cheese come to mind?

The story of John Leland's mammoth cheese is a part of Washington lore. For Baptists, the story stands as a reminder of the cherished ideal of religious liberty and the need to stand ever vigilant in its defense.

The story of the cheese begins in summer 1801 in Cheshire, Mass. John Leland—Baptist pastor and political activist—proposed the unique tribute to celebrate Thomas Jefferson's long devotion to religious liberty and victory over Federalist rival John Adams.

On July 20, 1801, Baptist families gathered at the great cider mill to present milk and curd from more than 900 cows. The cider press, turned makeshift cheese press, produced a Cheshire cheese, 4 feet wide and weighing approximately 1,200 pounds. Stamped atop the cheese was the statement: "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

As winter arrived, the cheese began its journey south accompanied by Leland and a delegation of Baptists. News of the cheese spread quickly; crowds gathered along the route. Leland, always the evangelist, did not allow a gathering to pass without a sermon. Jefferson tracked news reports, eagerly anticipating the arrival of his gift.

On Jan. 1, 1802, Jefferson welcomed the cheese and Leland to the White House. It was the same day Jefferson penned his letter to the Danbury Baptist Association containing the well-quoted "wall of separation" phrase describing church-state relations. Leland offered a strong statement on freedom and social justice to the president. The mammoth cheese, Leland stressed, was "procured by the personal labors of freeborn farmers with voluntary and cheerful aid of their wives and daughters, *without* the assistance of a single slave."

Leland and his congregation celebrated and challenged a president who shared their ideal of a free church in a free state. These Baptists knew their denominational heritage of freedom. They knew the Baptist movement was birthed amidst religious persecution. They knew the earliest and most consistent ideal championed by Baptists was full and complete religious liberty for all. They knew religious liberty was an ideal worthy of celebration and proclamation.