

# Historian Edwin Gaustad dies at 87

by [Bob Allen](#)

March 29, 2011

SANTA FE, N.M. (ABP) -- Prolific author, influential historian and lifelong Baptist Edwin Gaustad died Friday, March 25, in Santa Fe, N.M. He was 87.

Gaustad, professor emeritus of history and religious studies at the University of California-Riverside, was one of America's leading experts on America's colonial period, particularly in areas of religious liberty, pluralism and dissent.

His books include *A Religious History of America*, *Dissent in American Religion*, *Baptist Piety: Last Will and Testament of Obadiah Holmes*, *Faith of the Founders* and *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America*.

In 2002 Gaustad was an expert witness in the widely publicized trial brought by the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and other groups against Montgomery, Ala., judge Roy Moore, who refused to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from the state courthouse.

Bruce Gourley, executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, described Gaustad as "one of the premier religious and Baptist historians during the 20th century."

Gourley said Gaustad's work influenced a generation of Baptist historians, at a time when many conservative Baptists questioned long-defended principles like the separation of church and state.

"At a time when many Baptists in America turned their backs on their denomination's freedom legacy, Gaustad clearly and consistently articulated Baptists' historical foundations of religious liberty and church/state separation," Gourley said. "Gaustad reminded Baptists and the world that the American commitment to religious liberty and church/state separation enshrined in the First Amendment was first

articulated and put into practice by Roger Williams and other early Baptists. He dedicated his voice and pen to the preservation of the best of Baptist principles, and demonstrated time and time again that American history cannot be fully understood apart from inclusion of the religious dimension of the American story."

Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, executive director of the American Baptist Historical Society, [called](#) Gaustad's death a great loss "to his family, the scholarly community, Baptists, and to those who understand the fight for separation of church and state still goes on in our society and in other parts of the world."

Gaustad was born in Iowa but grew up in Houston. After military service he graduated from Baylor University in 1947 and completed his graduate work at Brown University in 1951. His teaching career took him from Shorter College in Rome, Ga. (1953-57), to the University of Redlands in California (1957-65) and finally to the University of California at Riverside, where he remained until retiring in 1989, when he was named professor emeritus. He was also visiting professor at Baylor University (1978), University of Richmond (1987), Princeton Seminary (1991-92) and Auburn University (1993).

Gaustad was married for 63 years to Helen Virginia Morgan, who died in 2009. Survivors include three children, four grandchildren and one great grandchild.

A memorial service is scheduled for May 1 in Santa Fe. The family requests that memorial gifts be given to the [American Baptist Historical Society](#) in Atlanta.