



# A Distant Heritage: The Growth of Free Speech in Early America

*Larry Eldridge*

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## **A Distant Heritage: The Growth of Free Speech in Early America** Larry Eldridge

Historians often rely on a handful of unusual cases to illustrate the absence of free speech in the colonies such as that of Richard Barnes, who had his arms broken and a hole bored through his tongue for seditious words against the governor of Virginia. In this definitive and accessible work, Larry Eldridge convincingly debunks this view by revealing surprising evidence of free speech in early America. Using the court records of every American colony that existed before 1700 and an analysis of over 1,200 seditious speech cases sifted from those records, *A Distant Heritage* shows how colonists experienced a dramatic expansion during the seventeenth century of their freedom to criticize government and its officials. Exploring important changes in the roles of juries and appeals, the nature of prosecution and punishment, and the pattern of growing leniency, Eldridge also shows us why this expansion occurred when it did. He concludes that the ironic combination of tumult and destabilization on the one hand, and steady growth and development on the other, made colonists more willing to criticize authority openly and officials less able to prevent it. That, in turn, established a foundation for the more celebrated flowering of colonial dissent against English authority in the eighteenth century. Steeped in primary sources and richly narrated, this is an invaluable addition to the library of anyone interested in legal history, colonial America, or the birth of free speech in the United States.

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