The Other American Revolution: Catalyzing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

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Narrative

The Other American Revolution:
Catalyzing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

AmberLee Hansen

Prologue
20 January 1769

The American colonies were on the verge of revolution and the Commonwealth of Virginia was in turmoil, but the John and Elizabeth Semple family in King and Queen County, Virginia, had reason to celebrate. On that day they welcomed the family's youngest son, Robert Baylor Semple, into the world. As his mother lovingly examined his tiny features, myriad thoughts may have run through her mind—thoughts about her child's future in a world that seemed so politically uncertain. There would still be peace in the American colonies for several more years before the political explosion of revolution rocked the colonies, but that peace was already becoming uneasy. Elizabeth Semple had ample cause for worry.

Four months later, John Semple died. His son would grow up never knowing his father. Still, as Robert grew he developed a deep desire to emulate the father he had only heard about. This desire first exhibited itself in the realm of religion. Robert had an uncle, his father's brother, who was an Anglican priest.

2. Ibid., 270.
As a young boy, Robert was inculcated in the doctrines of the Episcopalian church and the religion of his forbears. He became ardently Anglican—so much so that even his childhood friends noted his religious devotion. Robert’s desire to emulate his father was again manifest in his commitment to learning. Robert devoted himself to learning and study to the point that when the cost of school and board became too much for his mother’s scant finances to bear, his teacher offered to cover his expenses so that such notable academic potential would not go to waste. With the blessing of continued education, Robert began to study law, just as his father had.

Then, just before his twenty-first birthday, everything in Robert’s life changed. After confronting a scripture his Episcopalian upbringing could not explain, Robert abruptly forsook his childhood ambitions, abandoning the religion of his family and his legal studies to turn instead to bringing souls to God. Not God as the Anglicans saw Him, but God according to the Baptists. For in the Baptist faith Semple believed he had found a better truth, and this path he would not forsake. By the end of his life, Robert Baylor Semple was a man known in the American Baptist community as a preacher, innovator, and leader in God’s kingdom.

The course of Semple’s life was not so different from that of many other Virginians. Though Semple did not see the trend until many years later, his conversion to Baptist beliefs mirrored quite closely the earlier conversion of the state he called home, a parallel he later illustrated in his landmark work, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*. And just as Semple came to have a much broader influence in the Baptist community than he could have suspected at the time of his conversion, so did the Baptists in Virginia influence much more than just their communities or even their commonwealth. They changed the entire nation.

Religion in Early Virginia

*Our ancestors, being chiefly emigrants from England, brought with them all that religious intolerance which had so long prevailed in the mother country.*

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3. Ibid., 270.
4. Ibid., 274.
Unlike the settlers that would establish the colonies to the north, the colonists of Virginia had no intention of creating a new or altered society. When the first settlers established Jamestown in 1607, they brought with them their social structure, their laws, their preconceived intolerances, and their religion. From the beginning Virginia was an economic venture: money motivated the first Virginians to make the trip, and the continued opportunity for wealth encouraged waves of new settlers to immigrate. The colony's focus on monetary gain meant that its societal structure was largely a duplication of England's, minimally modified to match the unique needs of the colonial population.

One aspect of England's society that was duplicated without legal alteration was religion. Seventeenth-century England, which bred the first members of the Virginia Company, had one church, a state church, in which it was legal to worship. Likewise, the charters establishing the Virginia Company and condoning the English settlement of British America "directed colonists to follow the English Church 'in all fundamentall pointes.'" As successive legislation regarding religion was passed in England, it also became law in Virginia. Religion played a much different role in Virginia than it did in the


6. Religion was woven into the political and social fabrics of colonial Virginia. To escape its influence would have been next to impossible, as taxes were levied to support the Church and its pastors, and laws required regular attendance at worship services. See Samuel M. Bemiss, The Three Charters of the Virginia Company of London: With Seven Related Documents, 1601–1621 (Williamsburg: Virginia 350th Anniversary Celebration Corporation, 1957).


8. The implementation of new English laws in Virginia, however, often differed from their implementation in England. Not only did it take time for news of the new legislation to reach Virginia, but oftentimes the colony lacked the personnel or the motivation to enforce
northern colonies, which had been established expressly for religious reasons. While New England settlements were “permeated by the aura of religion,” for colonies in the South, religion was not as significant. Still, “while religion may not have played as significant a role in Virginia as it did in the northern settlements, it was nevertheless a highly identifiable factor in the building of the ‘Old Dominion.’”9 The role of religion in Virginia was “a highly identifiable factor” not because it was of paramount importance for those people like it was in the North, but because it provided their society with structure and cohesion.

In his book Religion in the Old South, Donald G. Matthews elaborated the point that Virginia needed a religion in order to maintain a cohesive society: “It was not that Virginians were uniquely religious, but that they were conventionally so, and that in their conventional way they turned to the church to keep the community together.”10 This point has been seconded by several other scholars, one of whom said, “From the commencement of the colony, the necessity of the religious element was felt. The company knew not how to control the members composing the colony but by religion and law. They exercised despotism in both.”11

The men who first came from England to settle Virginia were men who appreciated the structure of their lives in England. They did not colonize America with the intent to establish a religion other than the Anglican Church, as had many others. Instead, they reestablished the Church of England in America, because it provided the societal structure necessary to make their economic venture a success. As a result, political directives to support and obey Anglican

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9. Thomas J. Curry, The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29. The entire quotation reads as follows: “In contrast to the origins of New England, the founding of Virginia was hardly permeated by the aura of religion. . . . Both Virginia and the New England colonies were, however, products of seventeenth-century colonizing ventures that emanated from much the same religious background, and while religion may not have played as significant a role in Virginia as it did in the northern settlements, it was nevertheless a highly identifiable factor in the building of the ‘Old Dominion.’”


11. Charles F. James, Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia (Lynchburg: J. P. Bell, 1900), 17. Here James is actually quoting from Foote’s Sketches of Virginia, which explains why this point was supported by multiple scholars.
priests, and the Church of England generally, continued as they had in England. Religion was naturally incorporated into the fledgling colony’s developing government through legislation and taxation. By the onset of the Great Awakening, the Anglican Church in Virginia was at its strongest.

Anglican Patronage Erodes

Their learning, riches, power, etc., seemed only to hasten their overthrow by producing an unguarded heedlessness which is so often the prelude to calamity and downfall.

—Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

Before 1740, dissenting religious groups were scarce in Virginia—so scarce, in fact, that the Church of England enumerated church membership by counting the entire population of a given parish or geographic location. Other religions filtered into Virginia slowly at first; if they could, they stayed and lived quietly among their Anglican neighbors. Quakers, Protestants, Lutherans and

12. Edward L. Bond, Spreading the Gospel in Colonial Virginia: Preaching Religion and Community with Selected Sermons and Other Primary Documents (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 10–11. The specifics of the legislation and taxation that tied the government to the church will be more fully explored in a later section of this paper.
15. Bond and Gundersen, “The Episcopal Church in Virginia,” 190, 201. There is evidence of other religions in Virginia before 1740. The article formerly cited mentions scattered congregations of Quakers. In Lewis Peyton Little’s book, Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia, Protestant preachers are noted to have petitioned the government for licenses to preach only a few years after the English Act of Toleration was passed in 1689. See Lewis Peyton Little, Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia: A Narrative Drawn Largely from Official Records of Virginia Counties, Unpublished Manuscripts, Letters, and Other Original Sources (Lynchburg: J. P. Bell, 1938), 10–12. What is important to note is the scarcity of such dissenters. Little noted, “So stringent were the laws against dissenters and the supremacy of the Establishment so evident that Baptists were kept out of the Virginia colony for more than a hundred years after it was settled” (Ibid., 12). While Baptists may have been the least common of the major dissenter groups, the number of dissenters as a whole was quite small before the Great Awakening came to Virginia.
16. John A. Ragosta states that dissenting groups beyond the Quakers acknowledged by Edward Bond and Joan Gundersen existed; however, he, too, agrees that they were rare:
Catholics all began calling Virginia home, but they were so few and far between that their existence seemed almost negligible. However, as religious excitement began to grip the nation, more and more Virginians turned to find religious fulfillment outside of the Church of England. The Baptists came onto the Virginian scene quietly, like the several religions before them had come: one or two believers that turned to ten or twenty. However, their numbers continued to grow. Soon, the strength of this dissenting minority became a cause of concern for the Anglican masses.

The draw of dissenting religious groups like the Baptists was made all the stronger by the weaknesses that were growing increasingly apparent in the Anglican Church. At the onset of the Revolution, Virginia's Established Church appeared to be politically and socially secure: its clergymen were still supported by settlers' tax dollars, church attendance was required by law, test acts requiring Anglican Church membership for civil servants were in place, and there was no legal indication that any of these traditions would ever change. However, as more and more Virginians began supporting dissenting religions, there were few legislative allowances to accommodate them, and the pro-Angli Canyon laws began to feel oppressive. Similar to the political tension between England and her colonies, dissenting Virginians began to feel that the Church exacted taxation without representation. This growing perception that the Anglican Church was an extension of the English government estranged a number of otherwise devoted colonists. Only a decade after the Revolution began, the Church was disestablished. This act was the first outward expression exposing the Church's weaknesses.


17. In his short work *The Established Church in Virginia and the Revolution*, Rev. G. MacLaren Brydon bristles at the claim made by Wesley M. Gewehr that the Anglican Church was identified with the Tory cause during the Revolution. In refutation, Brydon used Gewehr's own words to argue that the leaders of the Revolution were tutored in religion by the Anglican Church and thus the Church could not have been a strictly loyalist institution. See Rev. G. MacLaren Brydon, *The Established Church in Virginia and the Revolution* (Richmond: The Virginia Diocesan Library, 1930), 7. Brydon also presents evidence that the majority of Episcopal clergymen were sympathetic to—even fought for—the revolutionary cause. While factually Brydon's argument is sound, facts are not what always prevail in contemporary public opinion. In practice, Revolution-era Virginians would have associated the Established Church as a whole with England, thus justifying in their minds grouping the Church with the "Tory cause."
fall from prominence that had already begun taking place in many Virginians' minds.

Exacerbating the Anglican Church’s decline and strengthening dissenting religions’ appeal was the relationship between parsons, their local lay leaders (vestries), and the members of their congregations.18 Semple outlined the relationship of the Established clergy with their vestries in the quote given above: that they were "patronized by men in power connected with great families."19 In actuality, what one envisions from the situation Semple described was more common in England. There, a clergyman would be supported by a single wealthy patron, thus allowing him some autonomy.20 In Virginia, however, a clergyman's position was a little more precarious. A vestry of upper-class men decided whether or not to retain each parson for their parish. It was intended that the vestry would find an acceptable parson, and then present that parson to the General Assembly for tenure.21 However, in many cases the vestry refrained from obtaining tenure for their parsons, instead reappointing them from year to year as they deemed fit.

This seemingly small change from the patronage system in England made a parson dependent on pleasing his vestrymen, for, if they were not pleased, they could simply find a new parson for the next year. As Virginia religious scholar Rhys Isaac observed, “The position of the parson was a weak one... From the start the incoming rector of a Virginia parish had to seek alliances, ingratiating himself with powerful persons and kin groups, or else face isolation... The parson's dependence on the goodwill of the gentry of his parish was apt to engender a sense of insecurity and to be a source of endemic conflict.”22 This insecurity led to passionate defense by the parsons of any laws protecting them, a defense which further alienated the clergy from their vestry and parishioners.23 These factors—the arrival of alternative religions in Virginia, the presence of laws supporting the Anglican establishment, and the clergy’s lack of autonomy, among others—were just a crack in the overbearing power of the Established church

18. A vestry is the local governing body composed of prominent, usually upper-class, landowning men in the community.
19. Semple, History, 44.
21. Ibid., 145.
22. Ibid., 144–45.
23. Ibid., 145.
as dissenting groups began to gain popularity in Virginia. But they were a crack that would widen and ultimately give way under the coming pressure.

Persecution Begins

When the Baptists first appeared in North Carolina and Virginia they were viewed by men in power as beneath their notice; none, said they, but the weak and wicked join them; let them alone, they will soon fall out among themselves and come to nothing.24

—Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

For the most part, Virginians believed that these new religions would be short-lived, that time would expose the errors of their doctrine without the Anglicans ever having to intervene. In some areas, these voices were the most prominent, and dissenters were treated peacefully in these communities. But such was not always the case.25 Of all the dissenting religions, Baptists seemed to be faced with the most violent reception. One account is given of a Baptist, William Webber, who was preaching in Virginia when a magistrate attempted to club him down. When someone in the gathered crowd grabbed the club to prevent the bludgeoning, two sheriffs stepped forward with a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Webber and three other preachers. The group was seized by the sheriffs’ posse and taken away from the listening crowd. Later that day, another man who had been traveling with the same group of preachers was attacked with a whip, “the scar of which he will probably carry to his grave.”26

This anecdote is just one example of the Baptist persecution that was rampant in Virginia. Separate Baptists were arguably the most widely persecuted group of dissenters in Virginia.27 In fact, entire volumes have been published

25. Ibid., 29.
26. Ibid., 33–34.
27. This claim is supported by nearly every major work in the field. Buckley: “The Separates were more subject to persecution than the Regulars or any other group of dissenters,” Thomas E. Buckley, Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776–1787 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 14. “No dissenters in Virginia experienced for a time harsher treatment than did the Baptists,” Hawkes, Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia, 121, as quoted in William Taylor Thom, The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Virginia: The Baptists (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1900), 26.
documenting the persecution of this zealous group. But before the Revolution, Baptists were not the most numerous dissenting group in Virginia, nor did they hold the most political power. Such observations lead one to ask why such intense persecution was leveled towards Baptists in some communities. Understanding why they were so persecuted sheds a unique light on how Baptists differed from their dissenting counterparts.

Doctrinally, Baptists believed in the autonomy of each congregation. Unlike the Episcopal Church, which was governed from England and which had rigid stipulations of governance, the Baptists loosely agreed on a general set of beliefs while particulars were left to each congregation. There was no governing organization to dole out decrees for governance or doctrinal particulars. Furthermore, Baptists were vocal advocates for their beliefs—beliefs they supported by their actions regardless of the law. They simply were not satisfied with the limited rights they had been given. Most Baptists would not apply for licenses to form and preach to dissenting congregations, one of the stipulations imposed by the Act of Toleration in order to access the increased political toleration of religions. Nor would they back down from vocalizing their convictions in order to avoid such persecution. This refusal to comply with legal stipulations, and the Baptists’ continued preaching of their convictions was the most significant catalyst for their own persecution.

The first recorded imprisonment of Baptist preachers occurred in 1769, when John Waller, Lewis Craig, and James Childs were named “disturbers of the peace” and shut up in jail for forty-three days. Such a length of time would have been enough to dampen many religious convictions, but not for these three men. They filled their days of captivity singing hymns of praise and preaching the good word of God to the curious audience gathered outside the cell. When they were finally released, they entered public life with invigorated zeal, “thanking God that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ and His


29. Semple, *History*, 29–32. Parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689 to quiet the petitions of dissenting religious groups. “Men agreed that a limited measure of religious liberty was imperative, not simply for the preservation of religion, but for the well-being of society” (Curry, 3). And while the act did offer more religious freedom than had been previously available, dissenting congregations had to apply for and be granted that freedom by the government.
And their experience was not unique. As pioneers of imprisonment, Waller, Craig, and Childs set a precedent; their reaction to imprisonment was duplicated by many incarcerated preachers to follow.31

Church and State Collide

A number of memorials from different religious societies, dissenters from the Church of England, were presented to this Assembly, praying to be exempted from the payment of parochial dues to the Church of England.32

—Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

Dissenting groups in general and Baptists in particular had had enough of the parochial dues (taxes supporting the Church) and the persecution. They began to advocate for change. The Baptists and other dissenting groups began petitioning for the rights they felt they should have: exemption from church-supporting taxes and freedom to preach. In too many cases, however, their petitions were denied. Still, Baptists refused to act on unjust laws and took political action by disregarding the laws that were in place. Preacher and congregant alike defied the laws of the land in order to promulgate juster practices.

By refusing to apply for governmental approval of their congregations, Baptist preachers opposed standards set by Parliament. When Parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689 to quiet the clamoring of dissenting religious groups, they established an application process for dissenting religions to gain legal status. This act also became law in Virginia, as did all Parliamentary acts. Once a dissenting congregation had been approved, most of the legal fines and penalties associated with worshiping outside of the Church of England would be waived.33
Many Baptist ministers, however, refused to file petitions and take the required oaths to register their congregations with the government. One scholar wrote, “With few exceptions, if any, [Separate Baptists] did not recognize the right of any civil power to regulate preaching or places of meeting. While yielding a ready obedience to the civil authorities in civil affairs, in matters of religion they recognized no lord but Christ.” Those who did petition for recognition were often denied the licenses they sought. But lack of legal licenses did not stop Baptist congregations from meeting. As a result, “more than a score and a half of Virginia Baptist Ministers were incarcerated during Colonial days in the country jails of their own State.”

And preachers were not the only Baptists practicing civil disobedience in Virginia. Baptist congregants also had to break laws in order to worship as they believed they should. Since Baptist congregations were not recognized as acceptable by the government, congregants practiced civil disobedience every time they chose to attend Baptist services. Refusing to pay taxes to support Anglican clergymen, seeking marriage solemnization outside of the Established Church—both were actions of civil disobedience. Together, the quiet actions of Baptist pastors and congregants had an impact, just as the endurance of persecution had: conversion increased. The Baptists were arguably the largest, and assuredly the fastest growing, dissenting group in Virginia. This rapid growth gave the Baptists political sway.

The martyr-like persecution had another unforeseen consequence: that of drawing the awareness of policy makers to the subject of religion. One such politician was James Madison, the young civil servant who would later become the “father of the Constitution,” governor of Virginia, and President of the United States. In a 1774 letter to a friend, James Madison lamented,
I . . . have nothing to brag of as to the state and liberty of my country. Poverty and luxury prevail among all sorts; pride, ignorance, and knavery among the priesthood, and vice and wickedness among the laity. This is bad enough, but it is not the worst I have to tell you. That diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages among some; and to their eternal infamy, the clergy can furnish their quota of imps for such business. This vexes me the worst of anything whatever. There are at this time in the adjacent country not less than five or six well-meaning men in close jail for publishing their religious sentiments, which in the main are very orthodox. I have neither patience to hear, talk, or think of anything relative to this matter; for I have squabbled and scolded, abused and ridiculed, so long about it to little purpose, that I am without common patience. So I must beg you to pity me, and pray for liberty of conscience to all.\(^\text{39}\)

Just by enduring persecution, the Baptists were winning supporters such as Madison to their cause. But they accomplished much more than that. The same perseverance that enabled the Baptists to endure the intolerant hardships thrown at them by their neighbors also supported their untiring push, through civil disobedience, petitions, and memorials, for complete religious freedom.

Perhaps the most effective method of political action the Baptists utilized was their right to petition the government. The General Assembly received more petitions more frequently from the Baptists than from any other dissenting group.\(^\text{40}\) Even before the Revolution, the governing body received petitions and memorials from Baptist congregations asking for more freedoms, stating disapproval of legislative bills, and supporting measures they believed in. The Baptists were not alone in their use of petitions to express their viewpoints to the government. In fact, most religious groups—or community groups with religious motivations—filed memorials with the government. Anglicans petitioned to keep laws the way they were or to impose tighter restrictions on dissenting groups. Presbyterians and other dissenting groups petitioned, like the Baptists, for greater religious freedoms. But the Baptists were especially effective and prolific in their exercise of this right. Petitions gave the Baptists a voice against persecution, against religious oppression; they gave Baptists a voice for change that was amplified with the onset of the Revolutionary War.

\(^{39}\) In Galliard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison, comprising his Public Papers and his Private Correspondence, including his Numerous Letters and Documents now for the First Time Printed* (New York: Putnam, 1900).

\(^{40}\) Buckley, *Church and State*, 176.
Religion and the Revolution

When the American Revolutionary war broke out, most of the Baptists, being attached to the principles of the Revolution, took the oath of allegiance, and many of them joined the army.41

—Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

At the time, Robert Semple was too young to be recruited for service in the war himself, but many other young men, boys not many years older than he was, did join the Revolution. As it became more and more obvious that the American colonies were going to revolt against their mother country, leaders in Virginia began to look for ways to unite their state. Religious differences had to be mollified. Virginia's leaders would have been familiar with the Bible, which reads, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.”42 In order to be successful, the revolutionaries knew, they would need to be as united as possible. A scattering of fragmented groups would prove easy for a major military power like England to conquer. Under the threat of imminent rebellion, the majority had to compromise with the dissenters. The Anglican Church had to yield.

But the Anglicans were hesitant to do so, concerned that concessions made to the dissenters would only encourage further civil disobedience. Perhaps the old adage, “give an inch, they'll take a mile,” was on their minds. Numerous sources cite that Baptists would only be satisfied with complete freedom of conscience and that any concessions the Church of England made were just stepping-stones to their ultimate goal.43 So while petitions from dissenting groups, especially the Baptists, flooded the General Assembly to demand religious freedom, Anglican petitions urged lawmakers to retain the status quo. Despite supporters' misgivings, on the eve of the Revolution the Anglican Church conceded. The state allowed dissenters to be exempt from the taxes levied to support the clergy.44 No longer was “taxation without representation” in a religious context the sticking point it had been. Such a concession by the Church of England was enough to unify the patriot populace of Virginia. But the battle was still long from over.

41. Semple, History, 247.
42. Matt. 12:25 (King James Version).
44. Buckley, Church and State, 38.
Clamor for Disestabl ishment

From the beginning, the Baptists were unremitting in their exertions to obtain liberty of conscience; they contended that... they were entitled to the same privileges that were enjoyed by the dissenters in England... they began to entertain serious hope... of actually overturning the Church Establishment, from whence all their oppression had arisen. Petitions for this purpose were accordingly drawn and circulated with great industry.45

—Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

One of the greatest concerns held by supporters of the Established Church may well have been that any concession by the Church of England would not pacify the Baptists for long. And they would have been right. Within three years the Baptists were again vocalizing their discontent. Expert Thomas Buckley wrote, “In 1777 the first audible moans were heard from the Baptists. Although in exempting dissenters from religious taxation, the legislature had eliminated a major source of their discontent, it had not disestablished the Church of England.”46

Disestablishment was not just a matter of principle for the Baptists, but a matter of doctrine. Baptists believed “that religious liberty was essential for man to respond to God’s will and urged the separation of church from state so that the church might fulfill its mission uncontaminated by civil government.”47

The Baptists understood that if religion were supported by state funds, pastors would never be truly free to minister to their flocks as they saw fit. Instead they would be obligated to please the state from which their financial support came.48

In other words, disestablishment was the only acceptable option. Furthermore, the bill exempting dissenters from taxes supporting Anglican clergy still left the possibility open of general assessment: taxation to support religious preachers of choice. Even if their tax money went to support their own preachers, their religious freedoms would be limited by dependence on the government. As a result, the Baptists lost no time in voicing their concerns with such a bill. Once the war was well begun and progressing, their “moans” began again.

45. Semple, History, 41–43.
46. Buckley, Church and State, 38.
47. Ibid., 3.
48. Ibid., 38–39.
The Revolution was a hinge-point in the Baptist movement in establishing a place for themselves in American life and in obtaining the freedoms they believed in. Hight C. Moore said, “We glimpse [the Baptists] briefly as persecuted before the Revolution, patriotic during the Revolution, and progressive after the Revolution.” The war enabled the Baptists to go from being persecuted to driving change. The most significant change was the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom because of the radical freedoms it granted, its far-reaching effects, and its enduring nature.

Religion Takes the Political Stage

_The dissenting interest, all united, [were not] by any means at that time, equal to the accomplishment of such a revolution. We must turn our eyes to the political state of the country to find adequate causes for such a change._

—Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

The physical battles and turmoil of the Revolution were evidence of the intense political battles ensuing between the mother country and the fledgling nation. But political strife did not end with the Revolution. In the process of trying to win freedom, politicians also had to craft a better government, a better solution. It took the best people the country had to offer, every state sending their top politicians to propose and debate and sustain and strike down. Many of those from that elite group who rose to prominence in the nation came from Virginia. Not least among them were Thomas Jefferson and the young James Madison, and both had an intense interest in religion.

Thomas Jefferson wrote his “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” in 1777 and presented it to the General Assembly two years later for approval. However, the timing was not right. The recent onset of the war and the momentary appeasement of dissenting groups made other issues more pressing, and the statute was not passed. But the battle was not over. Baptists kept pushing for

50. Semple, _History_, 44.
the disestablishment of the Church through petitions and memorials. As the war drew to a close, the Baptists organized a General Committee to coordinate and unite the efforts of all congregations. Virginia’s Presbyterian population also added support through petitions of their own. And while very little progress was made during the war, all of these efforts set the stage for change at the war’s conclusion. Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, wrote,

The spirit of the times may alter, will alter. Our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless. A single zealot may commence persecutor, and better men be his victims. It can never be too often repeated, that the time for fixing every essential right on a legal basis is while our rulers are honest, and ourselves united. From the conclusion of this war we shall be going down hill. It will not then be necessary to resort every moment to the people for support. They will be forgotten, therefore, and their rights disregarded. They will forget themselves, but in the sole faculty of making money, and will never think of uniting to effect a due respect for their rights. The shackles, therefore, which shall not be knocked off at the conclusion of this war, will remain on us long, will be made heavier and heavier, till our rights shall revive or expire in a convulsion.52

Perhaps the most valuable contribution the Revolution made to religious freedom was its ability to unite the hearts of the people so that when it was ended, they were ready to enact change.

The Statute was again presented to the General Assembly in 1786, this time by James Madison. The debate concerning religious policy was coming to a head; a decision would have to be made. The one side, supporting complete religious freedom as outlined in the Statute for Religious Freedom, was led by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. The other side, led by Patrick Henry, comprised those who supported general assessment and the continued state support of religion. By this time, Thomas Jefferson was serving as an ambassador to France and was no longer in the United States. However, his support was still behind the statute. In fact, at the end of his life, Jefferson considered his authoring of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom one of his three greatest accomplishments and had it inscribed on his tombstone alongside his authoring

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the Declaration of Independence and founding the University of Virginia. But Jefferson's absence meant that Madison was left to spearhead the passage of the Statute alone. And he was up against one of the most formidable political opponents of the time: Patrick Henry.

To make matters worse, Madison and Henry were complete political opposites. When the Assembly met in the fall of 1784, they disagreed on every topic presented. One scholar noted, "In a series of contests, [Madison] and Henry clashed—on the collection of taxes, the payment of British debts, and the advisability of a new constitution for Virginia. In each case Madison favored the measure, while Henry was opposed, and in each case Henry's views prevailed. He was still the guiding star, capable of changing votes and reversing decisions by the sheer brilliance of his oratory."

How, then, did the Statute for Religious Freedom ever become law if Henry could so easily swing votes to his opposing viewpoint? Like the persistent Baptists who did not give up until freedom of conscience had been established, Madison worked patiently, passing smaller laws and stalling proposed bills in order to facilitate the separation of church and state, until the time was right to present the Statute. That time came in the closing months of 1786, while Henry was serving as governor of Virginia. In the end, Madison's persistence and beliefs, as well as the persistence and beliefs of Virginia's dissenting population, the Baptists being foremost among them, paid off. Thomas Buckley published the following tribute to their efforts:

Since the beginning of his public career [Madison] had firmly held to the belief that civil government's sole function with regard to religion was to preserve its free exercise among the people in a state. But the success of his crusade to establish this principle against the opposing values of those who


54. Buckley, Church and State, 71.

55. Buckley, Church and State, 78.

56. In 1784, support for general assessment was strong. But Madison worked to stall the passing of the bill that would make general assessment law. As a result, the bill was not passed in 1784, but died quietly in committees in the fall of 1785. See Dreisbach, "A New Perspective," 173–74.

57. As governor, Henry would not have been a member of the General Assembly; he would not have been present to vote or to sway votes.
The Thetean

The general assessment was only made possible in the last analysis by the political activities of the Presbyterians and Baptists. Thus it was that although they started from widely separated philosophies about the nature of man and the value of organized religion in society, the rationalists and the religionists arrived at the same practical conclusions and joined forces. The combined political weight had won the battle. 58

Freedom of Conscience was established. The battle, on the state level at least, was won. But political change was still on the horizon.

Change in the Nation

_When the Constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a society, had unusual strugglings of mind, fearing that the liberty of conscience (dearer to us than property and life) was not sufficiently secured._ 59

—Samuel Harriss, quoted by Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

The concerns quoted above were expressed by Samuel Harriss, chairman of the Committee of the United Baptist Churches in Virginia, in a letter written to George Washington on behalf of the Committee. In it, Harriss expressed concern that the freedom of conscience the Baptists fought so hard to obtain in Virginia would be lost under a stronger national government that initially had no protections for religious freedom. In this same letter, Harriss expressed confidence that Washington would protect religious freedoms, whether or not they were explicitly stated by law. But Harriss's letter illustrates the concerns many citizens had with the power of the new government and its incomplete protection of individual rights. Almost from its drafting, citizens and politicians clamored for amendments to the Constitution to protect and ensure the basic rights they believed in, rights like freedom of religion.

When the Constitutional Convention met in the summer of 1787, no state had as liberal a standard of religious freedom as Virginia. Nor did any other state have the wealth of young, talented, passionate politicians that Virginia did. It is no surprise, then, that when a cry went out for a Bill of Rights it was a young Virginian politician who took on the challenge. In fact, it was the very politician who had spearheaded the efforts to pass the Virginia Statute for Religious

58. Buckley, _Church and State_, 164.
59. Semple, _History_, 485–86.

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Freedom, who had written several key documents about religion during the Revolution: James Madison. The standards that were incorporated into the first amendment to grant religious freedom were by no means as comprehensive as the statute passed in Virginia; instead they subtly allowed for individual states to come to such sweeping changes on their own. However, the religion clauses of the first amendment were in no doubt taken from Madison's experience with the Virginia Statute. The concepts embodied by the Statute were simplified, reworded, and passed on the national level as the religion clauses of the First Amendment.

The inclusion of religious freedoms in the first amendment was made possible by the battle over those freedoms that had taken place in Virginia, battles in which the Baptists were on the front lines. Virginia had been the proving ground for religious freedom. It was the context in which James Madison and other prominent Virginians thought through how best to balance church and state. It was the place where Baptists and other dissenting groups fought, and won, to disestablish the Church of England, the church sanctioned by the state. The battle won by dissenters in Virginia gave policy makers the confidence and the experience to then establish religious freedom in the nation. Robert Semple was right to be proud of his religious heritage.

Virginia Baptists’ Influence on the Bill of Rights

We are not to understand that this important ecclesiastical revolution was effected wholly by the Baptists. They were certainly the most active; but they were also joined by other dissenters.60

—Robert Baylor Semple, 1810

As Robert Semple admitted, the Baptists did not single-handedly bring about religious change in Virginia or in the nation. Politicians and activists aside, there were many other dissenting religious groups who also played key roles in helping to establish complete freedom of conscience: the Quakers, the Methodists, the Regular Baptists, and the Mennonites to name but a few. Most notable among the additional dissenting religious groups were the Presbyterians. In the past, scholars have named the Presbyterians as the most influential group of

60. Semple, History, 44.
dissenters in promoting religious change. 61 It is true that the Presbyterians had a much larger representation in the General Assembly and thus could directly influence the passing of Virginia legislative bills more effectively than could the Separatist Baptists. Presbyterians, like the Baptists, also petitioned the government for expanded religious liberties. These contributions were important; however, they do not outweigh the persistent, vocal leadership of the Baptist dissenters who, unlike the Presbyterians, could not peacefully practice their religion until freedom of conscience was granted.

As the largest dissenting group in Great Britain, Presbyterians received the full intended benefits from the English religious toleration laws passed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The laws were tailored specifically for the Presbyterian dissenter. 62 As a result, Virginian Presbyterians could take advantage of the provisions offered them and assimilate peacefully into Virginian life. They sought for expanded freedoms as shown by Presbyterian petitions to the General Assembly and their support of the Statute for Religious Freedom, but they were more satisfied with life under the Act of Toleration than were the Baptists. Their doctrine and their situation did not provide the motivating drive that the Baptists’ did. And while the Presbyterian contribution is not to be diminished, neither should the Baptists’ offering be overshadowed undeservingly. For without the Baptists’ diligent and vocal pursuit of disestablishment, there would not have been the pressing need or the context for legally establishing religious freedom. Historian Charles F. James wrote,

Some modern writers are claiming that the Presbyterians were foremost in the attack upon the Establishment and in the battle for religious liberty in Virginia, forgetting that they were stopped from all such action by their agreement with Governor Gooch, and by their oaths of allegiance, etc. To the honor of those early Presbyterians of Virginia be it said, that they did not break their promise nor violate their oaths. The records will show that, up to the date of the Revolution, they never demanded anything more than their rights under the Act of Toleration, and that not until the Revolution was accomplished, and Virginia had thrown off allegiance to Great Britain, did they (the Presbyterians) strike hands with the Baptist in the effort to pull down the Establishment. 63

61. Buckley, Church and State, 13; James, Documentary History, 24–25, 47.
63. James, Documentary History, 24–25.
It is the squeaky wheel that gets the grease, and the Baptists were the persistently squeaky wheel that pushed the government to apply the grease of religious freedom.

Would religious liberty have been established without the Baptists in Virginia? Perhaps. It is just as difficult to perceive the might-have-beens of the past as it is to isolate and analyze individual causes and effects devoid of their historical context and influences. Still, the Baptists played a significant role in the establishment of religious freedom in Virginia, one that should not be overlooked or diminished. Their vocal, ardent push for complete freedom of conscience and the sympathy evoked by their persecution provided the context and motivation for lawmakers to push forward bills establishing religious freedom in Virginia and, successively, in the nation. Because Virginia's Baptists would not be satisfied with the status quo, they endured the persecution and made the vocalized push necessary for change to occur. And change did occur. As Robert Semple memorialized in his landmark work, “Magistrates and mobs, priests and sheriffs, courts and prisons all vainly combined to divert them from their object. . . [But] the decree finally went forth . . . The Establishment was overturned.”

Epilogue

When Robert Semple died in 1831, the Baptist church was thriving. As soon as religious freedom was granted in the commonwealth and in the nation, Church buildings sprang up across the commonwealth. Increasing numbers of Virginia’s young men chose to support their families by preaching and saving souls, a wave Semple had ridden on its crest. From there Semple gave a lifetime of successful sermons at the Bruington Baptist Church, while also visiting nearby congregations as an itinerant preacher. Eventually, preaching to his own flock was not enough. Semple took a lead in encouraging missionary activities throughout the commonwealth. For years he presided at the meetings for the Virginia Baptist Missionary Society, and was also involved with the General Association of Virginia, often serving that body as Moderator or President of the Board of Managers.

Semple's conversion, like the commonwealth's, was slow in coming and drastic in its results. The whole course of Semple's life changed. Likewise, with

64. Semple, History, 25.

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol43/iss1/9
the passing of the Statute for Religious Freedom and the first amendment, life in the commonwealth and the country fundamentally shifted. And yet very few people would argue these changes were for the worse. Semple's conversion allowed him to influence and assist many more people than would likely have otherwise been his lot. The nation's conversion to religious freedom allowed the country the flexibility to grow and change and meet the needs of generations of Americans and immigrants without infringing on democracy. Semple died having lived a full life, giving his all to his Jesus. His legacy, and the legacy of his Baptist forbears, lives on, forever embodied in the American Constitution.

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