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Between Black and White: The Religious Aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion

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BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE:
The Religious Aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

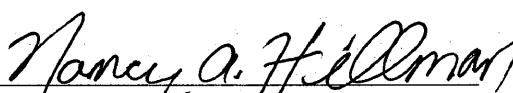
Nancy Alenda Hillman

2005

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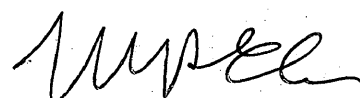
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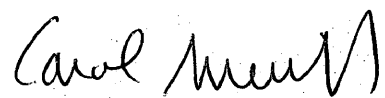
Approved by the Committee, November 2005



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ABSTRACT

In August 1831, a slave preacher named Nat Turner led a band of slaves in killing about sixty whites in Southampton County, Virginia. Following the uprising, the state legislature and Governor John Floyd debated the causes of and solutions for slave unrest. Concluding that black preachers and abolitionists were to blame, the state passed legislation forbidding any black person to preach and any black religious assembly to meet without a white pastor present. Some Virginians were terrified at the prospect of future slave insurrections and agreed with the lawmakers that black religious activity should be heavily restricted. Yet some Virginians disagreed.

In general, historians have described the post-Nat Turner period as somewhat of a turning point in the suppression of black religious autonomy. While many blacks were the victims of intense racial brutality during the weeks after the rebellion, and while the laws passed in March 1832 were undeniably restrictive, historians have only studied that side of the story. By asserting that the laws were widely respected and enforced, the traditional account of the years after Turner's revolt ignores the degree of debate and resistance among evangelicals, and the degree to which black Christians maintained autonomous worship and positions of leadership.

This thesis explores the reactions of Baptists and Methodists in Southeastern Virginia to Turner's revolt and the subsequent legislation. Baptist and Methodist records reveal that when local consortiums and conferences debated the role of black preachers and leaders during the 1830s and 1840s, they often came to different conclusions from those of Governor Floyd or the legislature. Many evangelicals resisted the state government's attempts to infringe upon black Christianity. In those who resisted, whether overtly or subtly, we find a fascinating "other South" that complicates our understanding of Southern evangelicalism and race relations.

BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE:

The Religious Aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion

PREFACE: THE SCENE

In the early morning hours of August 22, 1831, a slave named Nat Turner broke into the home of his master and led several insurgents in hacking Joseph and Sally Travis to pieces. For the next few hours, the small but growing army of rebels proceeded to terrorize Southampton County, Virginia, wielding axes, hatchets, and muskets. The slaves murdered almost sixty whites, including many women and children, before the Southampton militia and a regiment of the Federal army were able to subdue the uprising. Turner, a self-proclaimed prophet and preacher, had spent the past several weeks organizing the revolt. The plan was to massacre farmers and their families in the countryside, and then march on Jerusalem, the county seat. The Prophet Nat had spent months observing and interpreting natural signs, such as a solar eclipse in February. From these supposed omens, Turner determined that God had planned such a rebellion to bring justice to the oppressed, and that He had ordained a Prophet to lead it. In his *Confessions*, compiled from a prison interview by attorney Thomas R. Gray, Turner supposedly described his divine inspiration in frightening detail: “the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.”¹ When Gray published the *Confessions* in November 1831, the public became

¹ Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (New York: Bedford Books, 1996), 47-48; for a complete account of the rebellion and its aftermath, see Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975).

aware of the central role that religion had apparently played in the revolt, and the terrifying confidence with which Turner described his godly mission.

The Virginia government reacted by passing legislation forbidding any black person, free or slave, from preaching within the state. Blacks were prohibited from holding religious meetings without the supervision of white pastors. It seemed clear to many white Virginians, and especially to the governor, John Floyd, that the religious activity of African Americans promoted rebelliousness in both the enslaved and the free. Floyd feared that black preachers and northern abolitionists were collaborating to murder white Southerners and destroy the slave system: the Bible gave slaves notions of freedom, and free blacks took on airs of equality. Slaves needed to hear sermons from Paul's and Peter's exhortations to slaves to obey their masters. Instead, black preachers inspired their listeners with the story of Israel's deliverance from slavery under Pharaoh, or with Paul's words to the Galatians concerning the freedom of every person in Christ. Terrified whites, attempting to prevent any future massacre, saw the need to place all black Christians under strict white leadership. As a result, all independent black churches were to be closed down and black preachers silenced.

Or so it seemed. Virginia legislators succeeded in passing restrictive laws, but they were unable to transform everyday practice. On their face, laws suggest a societal consensus. Attention to popular responses, however, sometimes uncovers complexity and negates the impression that laws necessarily reflect popular consensus. Historians have analyzed the aftermath of Nat Turner's rebellion through the lens of a consensus model. Reading the legislation against black preachers, historians have concluded that the state government succeeded in suffocating the black religious community. The law

said that blacks could not preach; all white Virginians must have accepted and enforced that law. Yet even in modern-day society, one can easily observe that laws do not always dictate or even reflect widespread beliefs and behavior—they only embody the beliefs of those who pass them, and of those who press lawmakers to legislate. Few laws produce universal compliance, and some are routinely flouted. The error that historians have committed in interpreting Virginia's history following the Nat Turner uprising would be comparable to future historians analyzing twenty-first century society as one in which citizens consistently drove sixty-five miles per hour or less on the highway and always obeyed parking regulations.

In one of the earliest studies of African American religious organizations in Virginia, Luther P. Jackson described how, in the aftermath of Nat Turner's rebellion, the previously independent Williamsburg African Baptist Church was "now actually closed." Failing to specify who closed the church (whether local or state authorities or Baptist associational leaders) and for how long, Jackson nevertheless concluded that "the pendulum was thus swinging to a complete control by white Baptists of the former independent Negro organizations."² Jackson did observe a discrepancy, however, between the governmental and Baptist reactions to the insurrection. According to Jackson, "ministers and church people were still concerned about the Christian welfare of the slave population," but the legislation hindered their efforts to Christianize blacks.³ The history of Baptists and Methodists in the 1830s suggests that this discrepancy ran much deeper than Jackson suggested.

² Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (Apr., 1931), 205.

³ *Ibid.*, 206.

Although Jackson's detailed look at African American Christianity in Virginia was published in 1931, historians, ignoring even the partial discrepancy he uncovered, have continued to portray the insurrection's aftermath as completely devastating to the black religious community. These later analyses seem strikingly akin to John W. Cromwell's dated article of 1920, a top-down view of Governor John Floyd's concerns about the incendiary character of African American Christianity.⁴ In 1966, Herbert Aptheker, one of the most notable historians of the insurrection, described the aftermath as a "panic" that "flashed through Virginia accompanied by a reign of terror."⁵ In his *Fires of Jubilee* (1975), Stephen Oates provided a masterly discussion of Governor Floyd's reaction to the revolt and resistance to Northern abolitionist publications that infiltrated the South. Religion played only a minor role in Oates's analysis, however, as he devoted most of his discussion to the state legislature's debate on emancipation following the insurrection. Oates briefly described the new slave code's effect on black religious organizations: "The revised laws not only strengthened the militia and patrol systems, but virtually stripped free Negroes of human rights...and all but eliminated slave schools, slave religious meetings, and slave preachers."⁶ Oates's formulaic qualification—"all but eliminated"—proves all too necessary, and indeed emerges as inadequate, when black Baptists and Methodists are given a voice in the story.

In his recent dissertation, Charles Irons offers a sweeping caricature of the rebellion's aftermath: "Whites everywhere cursed the permission they had given their slaves to participate in religious services and to exercise such a high degree of

⁴ John W. Cromwell, "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection," *Journal of Negro History* 5 (Apr., 1920), 218-9.

⁵ Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 57.

⁶ Oates, *Fires of Jubilee*, 140.

ecclesiastical autonomy.” Irons argues that, in pinpointing religion as the source of rebellion, Governor Floyd was simply “voicing the consensus of white Virginians.”⁷ Irons’s own research on the First African Baptist Church in Richmond, however, seems to contradict these broad assertions, as will be shown.

Some historians have given attention to an “other South,” as Carl Degler described it. The work of Degler and Kenneth Bailey in the 1970s strongly suggested the need for a new interpretation of the religious aftermath of Turner’s rebellion. Degler reminded scholars of an obvious but frequently ignored truth: “the South is not and has never been a monolith. Always there have been diversities and divergences within its history and among its people, not only between the races, but among whites as well.”⁸ Refusing to analyze Southern religion as a monolith, Bailey argued that “the Southern churches were not so comfortably aligned with the racial mores of their region during the slavery era as now seems to be believed.”⁹

But when discussing the development of evangelicalism in the antebellum South, more recent historians such as Christine Heyrman have adopted a picture of decline in black rights and welfare. In its early years during the late eighteenth century, Southern evangelicalism was racially progressive. Baptist and Methodist leaders decried slavery and refused to allow slaveholders into positions of leadership. Their firm stance began to loosen by 1800, however, because the burgeoning sects coveted the membership and leadership of influential Southerners and sought slaveholders’ permission to evangelize

⁷ Charles Frederick Irons, “‘The Chief Cornerstone:’ The Spiritual Foundations of Virginia’s Slave Society, 1776-1861” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2003), 142, 154.

⁸ Carl N. Degler, *The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 2-3.

⁹ Kenneth K. Bailey, “Protestantism and Afro-Americans in the Old South: Another Look,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41 (Nov. 1975), 452.

slaves. By the 1830s and 1840s, slaveholders had taken control of evangelical churches and had turned their religion into a powerful justification for slavery. As Donald Mathews demonstrated, this slaveholding ideology argued that the system of servitude benefited blacks, and that masters had a divine duty to ensure the religious instruction of their slaves—religious instruction by whites, of course. Black preaching was feared and restricted as white Christians directed all efforts toward bolstering the system and bettering the behavior of slaves.¹⁰ Yet even in the paternalistic, evangelizing, “Mission to the Slaves” that Mathews studied, a discrepancy between state legislation and evangelical belief arises. Judging by the laws they passed and the letters they wrote, it appears that many representatives feared black religious activity in any form. In order to maintain a foothold in the slave community, however, many white preachers asserted Christianity’s ability to prevent, rather than cause, slave rebelliousness, and they continued to seek the right to evangelize among slaves.

Heyrman’s story of an increasingly patriarchal and racist evangelicalism leaves no room for Bailey’s important assertion:

Had the churches in the Old South in fact been captives of their regional culture, blacks would have had no place in the clergy, which was probably the area’s most venerated vocation; the liberties of blacks in religious activities would have been more narrowly restricted; the punctilios that customarily governed white-black interactions would have been adhered to more scrupulously at religious gatherings; and the disfranchisement of blacks in church decision making would have been indelibly clarified before the 1840s and 1850s.¹¹

It appears that Bailey’s call for “another look” at Southern Protestantism went unheeded by later historians such as Heyrman. As a closer study of the Baptist and Methodist

¹⁰ See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), and Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

¹¹ Bailey, “Protestantism,” 471-72.

churches and organizations will reveal, there was no ideological consensus or uniform practice concerning black religious activity and leadership. In fact, following Turner's rebellion, many white religious leaders advocated that blacks maintain their current positions as preachers and deacons. The history of evangelicalism in Virginia after 1831 calls into question any monolithic view of the South or of Southern Christianity.

Historian Melvin Ely has contributed much to our understanding of Southern history by demonstrating how varied relationships between blacks and whites could be. In his recent work, *Israel on the Appomattox*, Ely reveals the disconnect between law and everyday life through his original and detailed research on Prince Edward County, Virginia. He has presented a surprising variety of ties—social, economic, and religious—that existed between whites and free blacks on the local level. When discussing the process by which Baptist churches rebuked and punished members for disorderly behavior, he concludes: “the church was the one institution in Southern life that applied essentially the same rules to whites and blacks alike.” “Black and white Christians,” he argues, “defined sin and salvation similarly” and “stood together against the aggression of their profane fellow men.”¹² Black and white evangelicals formed lasting religious connections and operated from the same ideological basis. Often, their hopes for redemption, love of fellowship, and devotion to God superseded their attention to race and to legislation designed to repress black Christians.

The following chapters will trace the reactions of three groups to Nat Turner's rebellion: the state government, two regional Baptist associations in Virginia, and the Methodist conference in the southeastern part of the state. The religious organizations

¹² Melvin Patrick Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 320.

selected are situated on and around the peninsula between the James and York Rivers. The peninsula is located within fifty miles of the insurrection; the gruesome events south of the James River definitely aroused much terror among the white population, and among blacks who feared the repercussions. Yet black religious activity did not cease, nor did white support for such activity.

These chapters focus on southeastern Virginia not only because of its proximity to Southampton County, but also because of the large population of slaves and free blacks and the long-established and sizeable African American churches which dotted the area. Williamsburg African Baptist Church was one example of such a church. Founded in the late eighteenth century, the congregation boasted more members than almost any other church, white or black, in the state of Virginia throughout the early nineteenth century. Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg contained substantial numbers of slaves and free blacks as well, and it dwarfed the white churches in the city and in the neighboring county of Prince George.

Southeastern Virginia included two of the state's largest cities: Norfolk and Petersburg. African American churches were usually located in cities and large towns because of the high percentage of free blacks concentrated in urban areas. Free blacks enjoyed the relative anonymity of cities, along with the opportunities to earn a living through skilled labor. Because they were much more likely to be literate than slaves, free blacks were instrumental in organizing black churches and assuming leadership roles within them. With such large numbers of free blacks and slaves, the area in question—from the peninsula to the neighboring cities of Norfolk and Petersburg—is an excellent location for an in-depth study of the religious and racial aftermath of the rebellion. If any

area in Virginia could be expected to see a repressive response to black preaching and worship after 1831, this one would seem to be a leading candidate.

Table 1: Percentages of Free Blacks and Slaves in Southeastern Virginia, 1830

1830	Free Blacks	Slaves	Whites	% of Blacks in Population
James City Co.	572	1,983	1,283	67
York Co.	627	2,598	2,129	60
Norfolk City	928	3,756	5,130	48
Norfolk Co.	970	5,838	8,184	45
Petersburg City	2,032	2,850	3,440	59
Prince George Co.	700	4,598	3,069	63
Totals	5,829	21,623	23,235	54
Virginia as a whole	47,348	469,757	694,300	43

Citation: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

INTRODUCTION: FEAR AND DEBATE IN RICHMOND

Soon after he received the horrifying news from Southampton in late August 1831, Governor John Floyd identified black preaching and abolitionist literature as the causes of slave unrest. Directly following the rebellion, newspaper reports highlighted Nat Turner's religious inspiration and sensationalized his role as a fanatical self-proclaimed preacher. The *Richmond Enquirer* reported: "Nat, the ringleader, who calls himself General, pretends to be a Baptist preacher—a great enthusiast—declares to his comrades that he is commissioned by Jesus Christ, and proceeds under his inspired directions."¹³ The *Constitutional Whig* deprecated Turner's motives, yet suggested they sprang from religious roots: "He acted upon no higher principle than the impulse of revenge against the whites, as the enslavers of himself and his race;...being a fanatic, he possibly persuaded himself that Heaven would interfere."¹⁴

Letters from frightened Virginians whose slaves had obtained copies of the *Liberator*, a abolitionist newspaper that had commenced publication in Boston earlier in the year, also reached the Governor's mansion. One letter to Governor Floyd described the abolitionist articles printed in the *Liberator*: "The addresses of the incendiaries I have mentioned are read in their churches by their ministers and others and they are taught the horrible doctrine that it is no harm for the slaves to kill their masters and possess

¹³ *Richmond Enquirer*, Aug. 30, 1831, in Henry Irving Tragle, compiler, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 45.

¹⁴ *Constitutional Whig*, Sept. 3, 1831, in *ibid.*, 70.

themselves of their soil. Depend upon it Sir that much mischief is hatching....”¹⁵

Following the revolt, Floyd received many letters of this kind from Virginians horrified at the infiltration of abolitionist literature. Abolitionists sent letters to the governor and to Virginia plantation owners decrying the institution of slavery as the obvious cause of slave unrest. Floyd assembled the Virginians’ letters, as well as abolitionist mailings, newspapers, and addresses, into a scrapbook, which he presented to the Virginia House of Delegates on December 6.¹⁶

Two of the most threatening abolitionist pieces in Floyd’s collection—David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* and a letter advocating violence from a “Boston abolitionist”—pointed to the potentially incendiary character of religion. Walker’s *Appeal* of 1829 invoked the true gospel as the harbinger of equality in America, lambasting those “Christians” who supported slavery:

Can the American preachers appeal unto God, the Maker and Searcher of hearts, and tell him, with the Bible in their hands, that they make no distinction on account of men’s colour? Can they say, O God! Thou knowest all things—thou knowest that we make no distinction between thy creatures, to whom we have to preach thy Word? Let them answer the Lord; and if they cannot do it in the affirmative, have they not departed from the Lord Jesus Christ, their master?¹⁷

Walker’s version of Christianity threatened to inspire a thirst for freedom and a will to resistance among blacks. Floyd expressed his fear of this outcome in a letter to the Governor of South Carolina:

¹⁵ Anonymous to John Floyd, Oct. 15, 1831, in “John Floyd Slave and Free Negro Letterbook—1831,” in Floyd Executive Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

¹⁶ Floyd’s collection of letters and publications can be found in the archives of the Library of Virginia. It includes fifteen letters from both Virginians and abolitionists, seventeen newspapers (including issues of the *African Sentinel and Journal of Liberty*, New York; the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Baltimore; and the *Liberator*, Boston), and four printed pamphlets (including the American Colonization Society July 1831 circular, the June 1831 Minutes of the First Annual Convention of the People of Colour, William Lloyd Garrison’s June 1831 address in Philadelphia, and David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, Boston, 1829).

They [abolitionists] began first by making them [blacks] religious—their conversations were of that character—telling the blacks God was no respecter of persons—the black man was as good as the white—that all men were born free and equal—that they cannot serve two masters—that the white people rebelled against England to obtain freedom, so have the blacks a right to do.¹⁷

A mysterious letter supposedly postmarked from Boston and received in Southampton County further confirmed in Floyd's mind the danger of Christianity among blacks. The unknown author, under the pseudonym "Nero," declared:

Our plan is to operate upon the Sympathies, prejudices and superstitions of the miserable beings you at present lord it over; and above all to arouse in their feelings a religious frenzy which is always effectual; only to make them think that their leaders are inspired, or that they are doing God's service, and that will be enough to answer our purpose.¹⁸

Even though the authenticity of this radical letter is questionable, it still inspired fear in the governor. Upon reading it and other abolitionist addresses, Floyd began to believe that Southern black preachers were conspiring with northern abolitionists, concluding: "Often from the pulpits these pamphlets and papers were read...the incendiary publications of Walker, Garrison, Knapp of Boston, these too with songs and hymns of a similar character were circulated, read and commented upon—We resting in apathetic security until the Southampton affair. I am fully convinced that every black preacher in the whole country east of the Blue Ridge was in the secret."¹⁹ To Governor Floyd, antislavery religion was the heart of the problem.

In his address to the House of Delegates on December 6, Floyd expressed his conclusions about the revolt and the necessary legal reaction:

¹⁷ Peter P. Hinks, ed., *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 44.

¹⁸ John Floyd to James Hamilton, Jr., Nov. 19, 1831 in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 275.

¹⁹ "Nero" to G.T. Trezvant, Jerusalem, Southampton County, n.d., in "John Floyd Letterbook," in Floyd Executive Papers, Library of Virginia. The letter was received sometime in late autumn of 1831 and was forwarded to Governor Floyd in Richmond.

²⁰ Floyd to Hamilton, Nov. 19, 1831, in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 275-76.

The most active among ourselves, in stirring up the spirit of revolt, have been the negro preachers. Through the indulgence of the magistracy and the laws, large collections of slaves have been permitted to take place, at any time through the week for the ostensible purpose of indulging in religious worship, but in many instances the real purpose with the preacher was of a different character. The public good requires the negro preachers to be silenced, who, full of ignorance, are incapable of inculcating any thing but notions of the wildest superstition, thus preparing fit instruments, in the hands of the crafty agitators, to destroy the public tranquility.²¹

In the following days, Virginia newspapers published Floyd's address. By late December, most Virginians knew that the governor thought black preachers were to blame for the revolt. As the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, however, many residents of southeastern Virginia, at least, disagreed with Floyd, and chose not to heed his warnings or enforce his legislation.

One of the most significant results of the insurrection was the state legislature's decision to debate the future of slavery in Virginia. Throughout January and February 1832, delegates rose to defend or denounce the institution and discuss the possibility of future rebellions. Their speeches reveal the intense level of dissension that existed before the passage of the restrictive legislation. Delegate John A. Chandler of Norfolk County argued that slavery threatened the welfare of the state: "Has slavery interfered with our means of enjoying LIFE, LIBERTY, PROPERTY, HAPPINESS, and SAFETY? Look at Southampton. The answer is written IN LETTERS OF BLOOD upon the floors of that unhappy country. Do we not endanger our very national existence by entailing slavery upon posterity?" Chandler recognized slaveholders' right to property, but argued that the

²¹ Message of Governor Floyd to the Virginia Legislature, Dec. 6, 1831, in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 432-3.

safety of the nation superseded that right.²² John Thompson Brown of Petersburg strongly disagreed. Although acknowledging the enormity of the murders in Southampton, he contended that “it happened only once, in the course of near sixty years, which have elapsed since we became an independent people. And is this solitary calamity—so brief and rare—to change the whole tenor of our lives and uplift the very foundations of society?”²³ He argued that Virginia was still largely secure, and that slavery must continue.

Delegates Philip A. Bolling and Henry Berry of Buckingham and Jefferson Counties, respectively, adamantly pressed for emancipation. Where many of slavery’s advocates employed Scripture to justify the institution, Bolling appealed to Christianity to condemn bondage: “This, sir, is a christian community. They [Virginians] read in their Bibles ‘do unto all men as you would have them do unto you’—and this golden rule and slavery are hard to reconcile.” He later argued that “liberty is going over the whole earth—hand in hand with christianity.”²⁴ Likewise, Berry decried the regime whites imposed on slaves and free blacks: “Pass as severe laws as you will, to keep these unfortunate creatures in ignorance, it is in vain, unless you can extinguish that spark of intellect which God has given them. Let any man who advocates slavery, examine the system of laws that we have adopted...and he may shed a tear upon that.” He lamented that lawmakers had “as far as possible” blocked “every avenue by which light might enter [slaves’] minds.” They had only to go “one step further” to “extinguish the capacity to

²² *The Speech of John A. Chandler (of Norfolk County,) in the House of Delegates of Virginia....* Delivered January 17, 1832. (Richmond: Thomas W. White, 1832), 5-7, quotation on 7. In Library of Virginia, Special Collections.

²³ *The Speech of John Thompson Brown, in the House of Delegates of Virginia....* Delivered January 18, 1832. (Richmond: Thomas W. White, 1832), 30. In Library of Virginia, Special Collections.

²⁴ *The Speeches of Philip A. Bolling (of Buckingham,) in the House of Delegates of Virginia....* Delivered January 11 and 25, 1832. (Richmond: Thomas W. White, 1832), 14, 16. Library of Virginia.

see the light.”²⁵ In interpreting the white reaction to Nat Turner’s rebellions primarily through the legislation passed, many historians have obscured progressive viewpoints like those of Bolling and Berry.²⁶

By March, nevertheless, the proslavery faction prevailed. Slavery would remain entrenched in Virginia, and strict slave and free black codes would be enacted to prevent future insurrections. The House of Delegates passed the following act on March 15, 1832:

No slave, free negro or mulatto, whether he shall have been ordained or licensed, or otherwise, shall hereafter undertake to preach, exhort or conduct, or hold any assembly or meeting, for religious or other purposes, either in the day time, or at night; and any slave, free negro or mulatto, so offending, shall for every such offence, be punished with stripes at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding thirty-nine lashes.²⁷

The act forbade blacks to attend any night meetings, even under the direction of white pastors, to carry firearms, or to sell liquor. It stipulated that no free blacks were allowed to immigrate into Virginia, and reiterated a law of 1806 requiring any newly emancipated black person to leave the state within a year. The legislation also established severe punishments for anyone writing or printing incendiary publications. A year earlier, in April 1831, fearing the effects of David Walker’s recently published *Appeal*, the state government had also passed a law making it exceedingly difficult for blacks to gain

²⁵ *The Speech of Henry Berry, (of Jefferson,) in the House of Delegates of Virginia....* Delivered January 20, 1832. Publisher unknown. Library of Virginia.

²⁶ Certain historians such as Alison Goodyear Freehling, William G. Shade, and William W. Freehling have not overlooked the deep divisions between antislavery and proslavery Virginians, Democrats and Whigs, conservatives, colonialists, and radicals during the slavery debates of 1832. Alison Freehling rightly contends that the antebellum period saw an “ongoing contest between a white community irrepressibly divided by slavery.” Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), xii. Also see Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 194-203; and William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 183-93.

²⁷ *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Begun and Held at the Capitol, in the City of Richmond...* (Richmond, 1832), 62.

literacy, and thus the ability to study the Scriptures: “All meetings of free Negroes or mulattoes at any school house, church, meeting house or other place for teaching them reading and writing, either in the day or the night shall be considered an unlawful assembly.”²⁸ Through the passage of these laws, the House of Delegates, the Senate, and the Governor had apparently pronounced the death sentence on independent black worship. The laws assuaged the fears of Governor Floyd and those predicting future religiously inspired revolts.

In southeastern Virginia, the press’s reaction generally mirrored that in Richmond. The editor of a Norfolk paper was quick to place blame for the insurrection on radical free black and white preachers:

If there was any desire to increase this spirit among our slaves, I would advise our citizens to permit coloured preachers to go on, as they have for several years past haranguing vast crowds, when and where they pleased, the character of their sermons known only to their congregations—Nor do I think some of our white brethren exempt from censure, when they fill their discourses with a *ranting cant* about equality...For my own part I think when a minister goes into a pulpit, flies into a passion, beats his fist...[and] plays the blockhead, that he gives a warrant to any negro who hears him, to do whatever he pleases provided his imagination can make God sanction it.²⁹

According to this article, preachers both white and black possessed the power to incite a rebellion among slaves. The incendiary character of radical religion needed to be closely monitored.

A month later, the editor chose to reprint an article from the *Southern Telegraph*, describing “A True Prophecy” published by the “Literary and Evangelical Magazine” of Richmond in 1825. The author of this “Prophecy” worried that slaves were “withdrawing

²⁸ June Purcell Guild, ed., *Black Laws of Virginia: A Summary of the Legislative Acts of Virginia Concerning Negroes from Earliest Times to the Present*, Reprint (Fauquier County, VA: Afro-American Historical Association, [1936,] 1996), 175-76.

²⁹ *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 30, 1831.

more and more from those ministrations, where they can learn the true character of Christianity; and insist with increasing pertinacity on holding meetings in their own way, and having preachers of their own color.” Black preachers, “altho’ extremely ignorant, (often unable to read a verse in the Bible, or a line in the hymn book),” were nonetheless “frequently shrewd, cunning men.” This article of 1825 predicted violence resulting from African Americans’ religious meetings: “white efforts to afford these people salutary instruction have been repressed or abandoned, a spirit of fanaticism has been spreading, which threatens the most alarming consequences.” The author exhorted readers to take action: “It is appalling, when such a mighty power as that afforded by the religious principle, is wielded in most cases by ignorant and fanatical men. Shall we, then, let this matter alone?”³⁰ This fiery article was republished in October 1831 in order stir up fear and resistance to black preachers. The *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser* also called for the removal of free blacks from Virginia, and expressed the hope that the upcoming meeting of the state legislature would pass the requisite laws.³¹

From both a state and local perspective, the outlook for black religious activity seemed grim. Yet the press did reveal some degree of dissension and debate. The *Norfolk American Beacon* chose to publish a letter, originally printed in the *Richmond Compiler*, that attempted to dissociate Nat Turner from organized religion. The author insisted that Nat Turner was “very improperly represented to be a Baptist preacher.” The letter continued: “That account, from the best information I can obtain, is an entire mistake.” Instead of a sanctioned black preacher, Turner was “one of those fanatical

³⁰ Ibid., Oct. 22, 1831.

³¹ Ibid., Oct. 5, 1831, and Nov. 8, 1831.

scoundrels, that pretended to be divinely inspired; of bad character, and never countenanced, except by a few of his deluded black associates.” The author described this revised explanation of Turner’s religious motivations as “an act of justice” to all evangelicals.³²

This article subtly denied the culpability of black preachers and challenged the notion that Christianity among blacks was dangerous. Turner’s fanatical theories were anomalies existing outside the established churches, *not* predictable offshoots of independent worship. The fact that Norfolk and Richmond newspapers published this letter demonstrates that whites were not solidly aligned against the religious activity of African Americans. What is even more interesting is that the letter was written by a resident of Southampton County, less than a month after the insurrection. According to historians, for weeks after the rebellion, Southampton and the surrounding counties were characterized by white violence against blacks and by the enforced silencing of black preachers.³³ While much of this is true, the letter that appeared in the *Compiler* and the *Beacon* shows that some whites still differentiated between deadly rebels and black Christians in general. There was room for debate, and Baptists and Methodists seized that opportunity. They continued to grant black churches some leeway, and thus demonstrated the disconnect between laws and ecclesiastical ideology and behavior.

³² Ibid., Sept. 20, 1831.

³³ Oates writes: “Never had Virginians been so frightened” during the weeks after the rebellion. He emphasizes that “all across the state whites formed patrols and vigilance communities, seized suspicious Negroes, fired off shotguns, and clamored for muskets from Richmond.” Oates, 108-109. Cromwell describes white violence against blacks: “Negroes throughout the State were suspected, arrested, and prosecuted on the least pretext and in some cases murdered without any cause.” Cromwell, 214-15. Aptheker characterizes the aftermath as a “panic” and a “reign of terror.” Aptheker, 57. The fact that horrific violence occurred during the weeks after the rebellion is unquestionable. Lawmakers did pass repressive legislation that could potentially have “stripped” blacks of human rights, as Oates claims it did. Oates, 140. Historians of Nat Turner’s rebellion have clearly proven and emphasized these facts. By doing so, however, they have underestimated the lasting religious ties between white and black Christians and

CHAPTER 1: BAPTIST AUTONOMY: WILLIAMSBURG AND PETERSBURG

In the mid-eighteenth century, religious revivals swept through Virginia during the “Great Awakening.” Evangelical fervor attracted thousands of whites and African Americans to Christianity as no preceding missionary movement had done. The flourishing Baptist sect gained particular popularity among blacks and poor whites during the 1760s and 1770s. Both groups appreciated how Baptist preachers denounced worldly hierarchies and asserted that all men and women were equal in Christ and could attain salvation. Baptists challenged the gentry’s claim to deference, and condemned forms of entertainment valued by the elite, such as dancing, gambling, and horseracing.³⁴ They deplored slavery, decrying the practice as a damnable offense against man and God. Many whites, slaves, and free blacks were also attracted to the emotional character of evangelical religion. Baptist pastors encouraged their flocks to shout, clap, and weep loudly during worship in order to fully experience a personal connection to their Savior and the Holy Spirit. Christians found passion in evangelical religion that was sorely lacking in the staid, hierarchical Anglican Church.

Founded in late eighteenth century, the Dover and Portsmouth Baptist Associations represented all Baptist churches and pastors in southeastern Virginia. The Dover Association included churches from Richmond to Williamsburg, and the

have failed to demonstrate whether the legislation was strictly obeyed or enforced during the years to come. In many cases, it was not.

³⁴ For a detailed account of Baptists’ criticisms of the gentry and worldly hierarchies, see Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists’ Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 31 (July 1974), 345-68.

Portsmouth included those south of the James River, from Norfolk to Petersburg and the surrounding counties, including Southampton. Such associations existed throughout the areas where Baptists had gained a strong foothold, primarily Virginia and North Carolina. These associations convened yearly, and each incorporated an average of thirty churches. Each church would send a delegate, elected by the congregation, or, in the absence of an actual representative, a letter reporting the status of the church. The associations held no formal power over individual churches—Baptists strongly believed in the sovereignty of each individual congregation. The Constitution of the Portsmouth Association made this clear in 1791, asserting that the association “shall have no power to lord it over God’s heritage; nor shall they have any classical power over the churches, nor shall they infringe upon the internal rights of any church in the Union.”³⁵ The Dover Association’s constitution adopted similar standards. The purpose of an association was to provide advice and to rebuke certain churches for problematic behavior.

If a church began to disintegrate because of lack of membership or internal feuds, the association would elect a committee to oversee the erring congregation until it could be stabilized or merged with a neighboring church. The delegates could also vote to exclude a church from the association if the congregation refused to heed godly advice. But always, Baptist associations recognized each church as an autonomous body to be ruled by its members. This ideology differed drastically from the hierarchical scheme of the Anglican and Methodist Churches. Along with serving as an advisory body, Baptist associations kept careful minutes of their meetings and recorded information about

³⁵ Reuben Jones, *A History of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association* (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton, & Co., 1881), 15.

individual congregations. The records prove an invaluable source for tracing the history of any particular congregation.

The Dover Baptist Association minutes reveal the resilience of the Williamsburg African Church following the 1832 legislation. The minutes distinctly present the differences between the government's and the Baptists' reaction to the insurrection, and leave one wondering why this fascinating discrepancy has yet to be pursued. An analysis of both legislation and Baptist reaction reveals that what was *intended* to happen among Virginia blacks and what *actually* happened were vastly different. The autonomy to which Williamsburg black Baptists clung, with the aid of white co-religionists, during this supposed "reign of terror"³⁶ contradicts any conclusion that the law was pervasive or devastating.

According to oral tradition, African Americans established a Baptist congregation in the Williamsburg area around 1776. The church's early history has not been confirmed with documentary evidence, but it is safe to conclude that outdoor religious meetings occurred in the area as a result of itinerant preaching and revivals. Writing in the early nineteenth century, when many would have remembered the church's origins, the Baptist historian Robert B. Semple associated black preachers Moses (last name unknown) and Gowan Pamphlet with the establishment of the Williamsburg Baptist Church. Pamphlet moved to Williamsburg as a slave of tavernkeeper Jane Vobe in 1783 and began preaching; Moses had begun his ministry around Williamsburg somewhat earlier. Semple asserted that Moses was often whipped for leading religious meetings (whether by his master or by local authorities the writer did not say), while Pamphlet was

³⁶ Aptheker, 57.

supposedly warned not to preach by the General Baptist Association of Virginia.³⁷

Perhaps white Baptist leaders feared the state legislation of 1785, which stipulated that “unlawful assemblies by slaves shall be punished by stripes.” Pamphlet and Moses gathered dozens of slaves around them as they preached excited sermons—this no doubt made some nervous whites deem such meetings “unlawful.”³⁸

Pamphlet persisted, however, and in 1791 he asked that the Williamsburg Church be admitted to the Dover Baptist Association. Associations usually waited a year or two to incorporate new churches into the organization, in order that delegates could be sent to inspect the nascent congregations. In 1793, the Dover Association formally accepted the church—the first all-black congregation in the association. “The Baptist Church of black people at Williamsburg; agreeably to their request, was received into this Association, as they could not have done better in their circumstances than they have,” the minutes reported. “We therefore recommend that some of the neighboring ministers be advised to visit and assist them in setting in order what shall appear to be wanting.”³⁹ This sort of paternal oversight of newly formed churches was not peculiar to black congregations. New and struggling churches within the association were usually placed under the care of nearby ministers. One can only speculate what was meant by the conciliatory phrase, “they could not have done better in their circumstances than they have.” Perhaps the

³⁷ Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, 1965, distributed by University Press of Virginia), 152-158; Jackson, “Religious Development of the Negro,” 170-1; Linda Rowe, Reference Queries: “Rationale for outdoor African American religious meeting,” June 4, 1991, and “What is First about First Baptist Church in Williamsburg?” May 30, 1989, in the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg (hereafter Rockefeller Library); and Robert Baylor Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia* rev. ed. (Lafayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1976), 148. Semple, one of the earliest historians of Virginia Baptists, published this history in 1810. It still remains one of the foremost studies of the early Virginia Baptist history.

³⁸ Guild, ed., *Black Laws*, 62.

association sympathized with the restraints slaveholders placed on black preachers and congregants and recognized the legal restrictions—such as the legislation of 1785—under which religious assemblies of blacks had developed. Though certainly not proponents of complete racial equality, Baptists did view African Americans as their brethren, offering a relationship radically different from the traditional racial order.⁴⁰

Baptist leaders consistently opposed restrictive legislation in the early nineteenth century. After an educated slave named Gabriel devised a plot to storm Richmond with an army of rebels in the late summer of 1800, the state government began, rather belatedly, to place tighter restrictions on black freedoms. Prosser had convinced his followers that, by seizing the capital, they could force Governor James Monroe to end slavery and grant them equality. The rebels never got to Richmond—a strong thunderstorm washed out the roads, and, after the conspiracy was discovered, Prosser and twenty-five others were executed. To prevent such a plot from developing again, lawmakers ultimately attacked slaves' right to assemble. In 1804, state legislation enabled patrollers to interrupt and punish groups of slaves gathering for night worship.⁴¹ In response, the associational minutes recorded the query: "Would it not be expedient to present a memorial to the next assembly, praying a repeal of a certain law, declaring what shall be deemed an unlawful assembly of slaves?"⁴² The association resolved to present the memorial. A few years later, the minutes revealed that the legislation was poorly enforced anyway: "The laws of Virginia are probably the most unexceptionable of any in

³⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association*, Oct. 12-14, 1793, in the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Richmond (hereafter cited as DBA minutes).

⁴⁰ Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt," 361.

⁴¹ Guild, ed., *Black Laws*, 71. Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 163-5.

⁴² DBA minutes, Oct. 13-15, 1804.

the world; that which respects the unlawful assembling of slaves, is not so well as we could wish; but being no where put in force, as to the improper parts, we feel no inconvenience.”⁴³ Having first opposed the legislation of 1804, the white Baptists gave it little attention after observing its impotence.

The Williamsburg Church sent black representatives to the annual meetings of the Dover Baptist Association throughout the coming years. During the church’s early history, Gowan Pamphlet and Israel Camp were most often listed as the church’s delegates. Because individual congregations selected their own delegates, the black representatives were mostly likely also the church’s deacons, as in the case of Gowan Pamphlet, the pastor. Other delegates may likewise have been active preachers within the congregation. Up until the late 1820s, when a second Baptist church formed in Williamsburg, the association minutes only referred to the black Baptist church as “Williamsburg,” and not “Williamsburg African;” white Baptists surely took note of their Williamsburg brethren’s color, but did not feel a need to note it directly. All in all, the association seems to have received the black church on an equal footing with white churches. Gowan Pamphlet attended the associational meetings until his death in 1807. Delegates Israel Camp, Benjamin White, and James Robert—all free blacks—represented the church most frequently during the next several years. Israel Camp (or Kemp), well known in York County as a Baptist preacher, was set free by his master, the Reverend John Bracken, in 1810.⁴⁴ In 1813, another all-black congregation, the Elam Baptist Church of Charles City County, formed and gained entrance into the Dover Baptist

⁴³ DBA, Oct. 8-10, 1808.

⁴⁴ DBA minutes, 1793-1814. For James Robert, see 1810 Federal Census, York County; for Benjamin White, see 1820 Federal Census, James City County; for Israel Camp, see Free Black Register, York

Association. Williamsburg and Elam remained the only black congregations in the association until Richmond African gained entrance in 1841.⁴⁵

From its inception, the Williamsburg church housed one of the largest Baptist congregations in Virginia. The congregation claimed a few hundred members during the 1790s, and when the association minutes began recording total numbers of congregants and baptisms, Williamsburg posted consistently high numbers. Membership included slaves and free blacks from the town and the outlying regions. The exact ratio of slaves to free blacks in the church is unknown, but it may have resembled the ratio in the overall population (in James City, seven slaves to two free blacks, and in York, four slaves to one free black). The church's leadership, however, was almost entirely free. In 1810, the Dover Association minutes recorded the total fellowship of the Williamsburg church at 496, the highest of the church populations listed.⁴⁶

By 1824, the number peaked at seven hundred. Though the population of First Richmond began to surpass that of Williamsburg by the late 1820s, Williamsburg still remained one of the largest congregations in the association until the late 1830s. Not only did Williamsburg boast one of the highest numbers of baptisms, but it also recorded a high number of exclusions. A congregation could vote to exclude any member of the church who had become "disorderly." The association held no power to exclude individuals from churches; it only sought to advise and discuss queries from individual

County, Aug. 20, 1810, in Department of Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg. DBA minutes spell the last name as "Camp," while the Free Black Register spells it as "Kemp."

⁴⁵ *History of Elam Baptist Church, Charles City County, Va.* (Published on its one hundredth anniversary. Richmond: Reformer Electric Print, 1910), in Library of Virginia. Like many church histories, this source is of questionable credibility, but the facts used are corroborated by the DBA minutes. DBA minutes, 1841.

⁴⁶ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pres, 1979), 307; DBA minutes, Oct. 13-15, 1810.

congregations.⁴⁷ As historian Rhys Isaac concluded, Baptists' frequent use of the words "order," "orderly," and "disorderly" in association minutes illustrated the Baptist concern with uniform moral order. Isaac found that for some African Americans, Christian marital values proved difficult to adopt: the most frequent cause of exclusion and disorder was adultery.⁴⁸ The minutes of the Dover Association indicate that blacks were often excluded by their peers in the Williamsburg and Elam churches because of sexual immorality and infidelity. Black leaders were no doubt concerned with the moral image and status of their churches, and they consistently attempted to enforce Christian practices among members.

Williamsburg African maintained its autonomy throughout the 1820s, contrary to W. Harrison Daniel's assertion that Baptist associations were restricting the religious practices of blacks well before the 1832 legislation.⁴⁹ Though associational minutes do reveal a growing concern for the supervision of black preaching, this sentiment was by no means pervasive or destructive. The white leaders' main fear was that blacks were preaching without proper qualifications, a concern they expressed in 1826: "We advise that each of the churches first make strict inquiry, as to the gifts and character of all the coloured persons now in the habit of attempting to preach, or exhort, and stop all who are not of good and blameless character, or who, on fair trial, are found not to be competent to the sacred work."⁵⁰ These were the same rigid standards to which white preachers were held. Preaching was not a duty to be taken lightly. And blacks continued to meet the qualifications—Williamsburg Baptist appointed black preachers throughout the

⁴⁷ DBA minutes, 1824-1838.

⁴⁸ Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt," 361-2.

⁴⁹ W. Harrison Daniel, "Virginia Baptists and the Negro in the Antebellum Era," *Journal of Negro History* 55 (Jan. 1971), 2-4.

1820s, with the full knowledge of the Dover Baptist Association. In 1828, the Williamsburg African Church queried the association: “Is it proper that a bond man should be a Deacon?” The association’s reply demonstrated that white Baptists had little if any inclination to restrict black leadership: “We consider it allowable.”⁵¹ The following year, John Dipper, a free black, received his license to preach in the Williamsburg African Church. Dipper’s licensing occurred within the African Church, and black delegate Benjamin White recommended Dipper to the Dover Association:

Be it known, that our beloved Brother John Dipper member of this church, In full fellowship and good standing; being in our estimation, possessed of gifts in the way of exhortation and preaching, which appear to promise usefulness in the cause of Christ; is hereby sanctioned within the borders of our own church, but [also] in the region round about, wherever it may appear that the way is open before him. And we do hereby recommend him to the [?] kind attention of the Brethren and friends of Religion wherever he may come.⁵²

The selection and licensing of preachers by each individual congregation applied in the Dover Association without regard to race. Dipper had to prove his possession of “gifts in the way of exhortation and preaching” not to the white-led association, but to black leadership within his own congregation. The Williamsburg African Church remained well entrenched as an autonomous body within the Dover Baptist Association.

The Williamsburg church faced temporary hardships following Nat Turner’s rebellion and the legislation of 1832. The association recorded its concern for the struggling church: “This body has experienced much affliction the past year. Their Meeting House having been closed in consequence of the insurrection at Southampton. No additions reported but 60 or 70 waiting candidates for baptism. Present number of

⁵⁰ DBA minutes, Oct. 14-16, 1826.

⁵¹ DBA minutes, Oct. 11-13, 1828.

⁵² John Dipper’s License to Preach, Aug. 2, 1829, in John Dipper Papers, Rockefeller Library.

members about 700.”⁵³ This sympathetic statement indicates that although the meeting house was closed (probably by local authorities), the congregation remained intact and retained the sympathy and trust of white fellow Baptists. Thus, historians, such as Luther P. Jackson and Albert J. Raboteau, who stated that the Williamsburg church was closed have presented only half of the story.⁵⁴ Though Raboteau did add that, “despite harassment and legal restriction, there were black churches and black preachers who managed now and then to successfully evade limits to their autonomy,” he did not include the Williamsburg African Church among these.⁵⁵

Black delegates continued to attend the meetings of the Dover Baptist Association following the legislation of 1832. In 1833, free blacks John Alvis, Benjamin White, and Jeffrey Barrett represented the Williamsburg African Church.⁵⁶ That same year, the minutes printed this statement from the African church: “This church reports that since they have been permitted to meet together they have determined to keep none in fellowship who do not honor Christ, and walk as Christians; and hence many have been excluded from their body.”⁵⁷

This statement raises two critical issues. First, one can speculate that, because the church presented this message soon after being “permitted to meet together,” the congregation was attempting to assert its good moral standing. Perhaps the congregants were defending their right to remain part of the Dover Baptist Association. The message

⁵³ DBA minutes, Oct. 13-15, 1832.

⁵⁴ Jackson, “Religious Development of the Negro,” 205; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 178, 196-7.

⁵⁵ Raboteau, 178-9.

⁵⁶ DBA minutes, Sept. 24-26, 1833. For John Alvis, see 1830 Federal Census, York County, and Free Black Register, York County, Oct. 15, 1804, Nov. 20, 1810, Oct. 20, 1817, and Mar. 17, 1828; for Benjamin White, see 1820 Federal Census, James City County; for Jeffrey Barrett, see 1840 Federal Census, York County.

⁵⁷ DBA minutes, Sept. 24-26, 1833.

may have had no relation to the Nat Turner affair, and referred only to behavioral problems within the church. But considering that it was the only message of this kind from the African church in forty years of recorded minutes, the connection seems probable. Second, the message suggests that, by this point, the church building had been reopened. A letter to free black Baptist John Dipper, who had moved north soon after the insurrection, confirms this point. John Andrews, a friend in Williamsburg, wrote to Dipper in the spring of 1833: "I saw your old Meeting House opened on Sunday last and it reminded me of you."⁵⁸ Apparently, local authorities had allowed the African congregation to reopen their meeting house no more than one year after the restrictions of 1832 had been adopted. This constitutes a dramatic counterexample to Herbert Aptheker's aforementioned white "reign of terror." If Williamsburg authorities permitted blacks to regain their church building, and the white-led Baptist association supported the African American congregation, the laws cannot have been enforced very strictly.

Freed at age thirty-eight in 1816, John Dipper had become a respected member of the Williamsburg community by the 1820s. He purchased his wife's freedom in 1818 and obtained a few slaves of his own in the 1820s. Whether these slaves were members of his family, and thus only nominal slaves, is uncertain. Dipper received a gun license in 1825, satisfying the court that he was a person "of probity and good demeanor."⁵⁹ Early in 1832, Dipper decided to move to New York, possibly fearing the pending legislation, which threatened to restrict the freedoms of free blacks in Virginia. While in New York and New Jersey, Dipper corresponded with friends in Virginia, many of them

⁵⁸ John Andrews to John Dipper, May 8, 1833, in John Dipper Papers, Rockefeller Library. Andrews' race is unknown.

⁵⁹ John Dipper's license to carry a gun in Williamsburg, Mar. 1, 1825, in John Dipper Papers, Rockefeller Library.

white. In 1835, hoping to visit Virginia safely, he asked Robert Saunders, Jr., a prominent white member of the Williamsburg community, to research the state laws regarding free blacks and tell him whether a visit south would be wise. Saunders replied: “I have according to your request examined those laws of the state which might operate upon you in case of your return visit. The result of that examination is unfavorable.”⁶⁰

Saunders indicated that the law prohibited free blacks from entering the state, and he advised Dipper not to make the journey. On the surface, it appears that Saunders’s reply demonstrates the harshness of the 1832 legislation. What is interesting, however, is that Saunders had to *research* the laws in order to answer Dipper’s query. If the laws had been widely enforced and firmly ingrained in the societal framework, Saunders would not have had to “examine” the legislation.

The state legislation did not undermine the mutual respect between Dipper and many whites in the Williamsburg. Likewise, the relationship between the African Baptist Church and the Dover Baptist Association remained intact throughout the 1830s. In 1834, the association minutes recorded Moses Moore as the delegate from the Williamsburg African Church. Historian Mechal Sobel’s research indicates that Moore was probably the same Moses Moore who would reappear at the Dover Baptist Association in 1859, as a black preacher from the Chickahominy Church in James City County.⁶¹ Moore again represented the Williamsburg Church at the association meeting in 1837 and 1838. Considering that many delegates during this period, such as Moses Moore and Benjamin White, had almost certainly been active preachers in the African Church before the insurrection, it seems likely that black preaching continued despite

⁶⁰ Robert Saunders Jr. to John Dipper, Mar. 27, 1835, in John Dipper Papers, Rockefeller Library.

⁶¹ Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 307.

legislation to the contrary.⁶² Black preaching most likely continued at the Elam Baptist Church as well, even after the state's subsequent restrictions in 1848, which detailed the definition of an "unlawful assembly" as one of "slaves, free Negroes or mulattoes for the purpose of religious worship when such worship is conducted by a slave, free Negro, or mulatto," along with any assembly "for the purpose of instruction in reading and writing."⁶³ The state legislature was reiterating the laws of the early 1830s by continuing to forbid blacks to preach or gain literacy. According to oral history passed through generations of Elam blacks, the white pastor James Christian, assigned to oversee the black church in the late 1840s, hardly participated in the services at all. He merely attended and "sat in the most comfortable seat to be had, listened to sermons by some of the colored brothers, drew his one dollar for attendance, enjoyed a good dinner such as colored people can cook, and quietly sauntered back to his feudal home."⁶⁴ This droll account revealed the blasé reaction of at least some white Baptists to state legislation. Although this oral history source is of questionable credibility, if even only a portion of it were true, it would still reveal a remarkable lack of concern for the state legislation.

If blacks continued to preach at Elam in the 1840s, a church with a designated white pastor, they had probably preached at the black-represented Williamsburg congregation in the 1830s. Although the law required a white pastor's presence at all black religious meetings, the Dover minutes do not indicate that a white pastor was specifically assigned to the Williamsburg church in the 1830s. Only after the church

⁶² As long-term delegates to the Dover Association, Moses Moore and Benjamin White were most likely active preachers, as was delegate Gowan Pamphlet before them. White was obviously in a position of strong leadership considering that he was the delegate who recommended preacher John Dipper to the Dover Association (see page 22).

⁶³ Guild, ed., *Black Laws*, 178-79.

⁶⁴ *History of Elam Baptist Church*, 25.

reorganized in the early 1840s was white pastor Scervant Jones ordered to oversee the black congregation. Clearly, the members of the association paid only cursory attention to the new laws.

The first mention of the legislation of 1832 did not occur in the Dover minutes until 1834. The minutes recorded an ameliorative reaction to the laws: “*Resolved*, That it be recommended to the pastors and members of our churches, to take into consideration, the propriety of adopting, in conformity with the provisions of the law aforesaid, a more systematic course of oral religious instruction for the benefit of coloured persons.”⁶⁵ The association made no mention of excluding all-black congregations or forbidding black delegates to attend the annual meetings. This reaction may have been directed mainly toward white pastors who had blacks in their congregations (many of the churches in the association contained black majorities), or toward slaveholders. The resolution did not explicitly mention the association’s two independent black churches—Williamsburg and Elam.

The African Church faced several hardships unrelated to the legislation of 1832 during that decade. In June 1834, a tornado hit Williamsburg, during which “many chimnies and frame houses were blown down, among which the colored people’s meeting house near the Lunatic Hospital.”⁶⁶ This report from the *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser* reveals that even a public newspaper outside the area of Williamsburg understood the meeting house as belonging to “the colored people.” The newspaper subtly recognized the church’s autonomy, only two years after

⁶⁵ DBA minutes, Oct. 11-13, 1834.

⁶⁶ *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*, June 23, 1834. The African American congregation’s meeting house was at the corner of Nassau and Francis Streets, on property obtained in 1818.

the restrictions on black religious assembly had been passed. The minutes of the Dover Association indicate, however, that the church was struggling during the second half of the 1830s, as groups of delegates and ministers from neighboring churches were sent to visit the church and report its condition in writing. The nature of the church's difficulty is unclear, but it was likely unrelated to the 1832 legislation, as the laws had had no effect on the church's standing in the early 1830s.

The difficulties proved irresolvable, in the judgment of the white associational leaders, and they advised the church to disband in 1839: "After much thought and deliberation, we recommend to the African church to dissolve and unite themselves to other churches in their respective bounds." As no Williamsburg African delegates attended the meeting that year, the association resolved "that a committee of seven be appointed to visit the African church and advise them toward an immediate dissolution, and aid them in adopting such measures as will gain them fellowship in contiguous churches."⁶⁷ Apparently, the church had become "disorderly," and its members' behavioral issues caused its exclusion from the association.⁶⁸ Whatever the breach in Baptist moral standards, the dissolution was certainly not a result of state legislation, which was never mentioned in the association's deliberations in 1839, and which had been on the books for some years by then. The racially integrated Zion Baptist Church, which had entered the association in 1831, now became the dominant Baptist church in Williamsburg. White pastor Scervant Jones led this congregation, whose membership reached 248 in 1839. Zion Baptist's membership did not increase dramatically during the

⁶⁷ DBA minutes, Oct. 12-14, 1839.

⁶⁸ *Religious Herald*, Oct. 12, 1843.

next couple of years, indicating that most members of the dissolved African church either continued to meet without associational approval or did not meet at all.⁶⁹

Within a few years, in fact, Williamsburg African had reorganized, and it was readmitted into the Dover Association in 1843. Scervant Jones now pastored the congregation, and white delegates represented the church at the association. The church's membership had dropped significantly, to only forty-five in 1843 and seventy-two in 1844. The church would not regain its former size until 1856, when it again reported over four hundred members.⁷⁰ Thus, the Williamsburg African Church began to lose its autonomy in the 1840s, rather than in the early 1830s. White Baptists took control of black congregations not in response to the Nat Turner rebellion, but apparently out of a growing paternalistic concern to shepherd black Christians.

The Dover Baptist Association established a Committee for the Religious Improvement of the Colored People in the 1840s. Reform committees, which also included groups promoting temperance and Sabbath schools, became increasingly popular among *all* Baptists—black and white—during this period. As the membership of Baptist congregations increased, the denominational oversight tightened. These committees displayed the growing emphasis on organized reform among both races, not simply a growing sense of paternalism among whites. In 1847, the Committee for the Religious Improvement of the Colored People reported the urgent need to Christianize African Americans:

There are 8,688 colored members [as compared with about 4,200 white members] represented in this body [the Dover Baptist Association], and probably six times that number of colored persons within its geographic limits. Here then is a field in which both minister and private members may labor with great hope

⁶⁹ DBA minutes, 1839-1842.

⁷⁰ DBA minutes, 1843, 1844, and 1856.

of success; a field, of the importance of which we solemnly fear not a single individual among us has formed an adequate conception.⁷¹

Although black Baptists were now formally under white control, white Baptists still viewed African American Christianity from a different perspective than had the legislature in 1832. Far from attempting to curb black religious activity, the Dover Baptist Association was strongly promoting it, seeing the black population as a fruitful field for proselytizing.

The Portsmouth Baptist Association conformed more closely to the legislation of 1832, possibly because their fellowship included Southampton County. Founded in 1791—around the same time as the Dover Association—the Portsmouth Association included two independent black congregations by the 1830s, both in Petersburg. Gillfield Baptist was admitted in 1810, and an offshoot, the African Baptist Church, was admitted in 1829.⁷² Like Williamsburg African, both churches experienced substantial growth during the years up to 1831, and their congregations were much larger than any of the white churches within the association. In 1831, the Portsmouth minutes recorded Gillfield at 729 members and the newly formed African Church at 564 members. In contrast to the neighboring association of Dover, the Portsmouth Association never permitted these churches to send black delegates to their meetings. White delegates from neighboring churches represented the two black churches during the annual association meetings. Yet the association still allowed the churches to operate independently from the white church in Petersburg—Market Street Baptist—during the early 1830s, even after Nat Turner's revolt.

⁷¹ DBA minutes, Oct. 9-11, 1847.

⁷² Jones, *History of the Virginia Portsmouth Association*, 13-14.

Following the passage of the legislation curbing black religious activity in 1832, the Portsmouth Association expressed more concern about the integrated congregation of Mill Swamp Church in Isle of Wight County than about the independent black churches in Petersburg. Apparently, black members of Mill Swamp had become “rebellious” after the insurrection. The minutes do not clarify exactly what “rebellious” meant. Most likely there was an increase in “disorderly” behavior, and some whites feared that this could have resulted from news of Turner’s uprising. In May 1832, the leaders of Mill Swamp recommended that their church and all other churches in the association should

appoint a committee or committees, whose duty it shall be to notify all coloured members to meet on some Sabbath day, which they shall appoint, to undergo examination and receive the instruction related to Church Government and their duty to their owners, and in case they refuse the instruction and government of the Church, the Association advises that they shall be expelled. And the Churches are furthermore advised to refuse license to coloured persons to preach and to interdict their holding meetings.⁷³

While the Portsmouth Association seemed prepared to enforce the legislation regarding black preaching, it still respected the independence of Gillfield and African Baptist. The two black churches in Petersburg continued to expand and prosper following the insurrection. The association’s lack of consistency in the insurrection’s aftermath is further made evident in their Corresponding Letter of 1832. Corresponding Letters were composed by associational leaders during the annual meetings. The association would then send the letters to other associations in Virginia in order to remain in fellowship with distant Baptists. In May 1832, the Corresponding Letter detailed the association’s reaction to Turner’s rebellion:

The insurrection in Southampton, which exhibited scenes of murder and carnage unparalleled in the history of our country, has produced a most

⁷³ *Minutes of the Portsmouth Baptist Association*, 1832, 25-27, in the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Richmond (hereafter cited as PBA minutes).

lamentable effect upon the religious feeling of many of our churches, and especially those in the immediate vicinity of the dreadful tragedy. The high character for godliness, claimed by many of the insurgents, and the extensive religious influence they actually possessed (though we believe none of them were Baptists) have destroyed with many of our brethren all confidence in the professions of that class of persons.⁷⁴

The letter stated that many churches had experienced disciplinary problems, primarily a “most rebellious and ungovernable disposition” among the black members, and concluded: “Whether in those Churches a union can ever be restored between our white and coloured members, or whether they must be separated entirely, and continue to exercise towards each other no feelings of fraternity or communion, are questions which can be decided only by the great Head of the Church.”⁷⁵ This letter clearly demonstrates the difference between the Baptists’ and the government’s reactions to the revolt. Baptist leaders were more distressed by the sundering of cross-racial fellowship among blacks than by the possibility of a future insurrection prompted by religious activity.

For the next few years after the rebellion, Gillfield and African Baptist continued to grow despite their lack of the white pastor whose presence the law required. In 1834, the minutes recorded the association’s recommendation for African Baptist to “procure, as soon as possible, some suitable white minister to act as their pastor, and [the body] further recommended that they seek the advice and assistance of the Market Street Church in that matter.”⁷⁶ When studied more closely, this recommendation presents an interesting question. For fully two years following the legislation of 1832, the African church did not have a white pastor. Yet during those two years, the church grew from approximately six hundred members to 827. Throughout the 1830s, the African Church

⁷⁴ PBA minutes, 1832, 45.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ PBA minutes, 1834, 8.

was the largest in the entire association. Instead of disintegrating because of the lack of white leadership, the church flourished. One wonders who was leading this church during those two years, and why the association waited until 1834 to recommend a white pastor. Because the associational minutes are scant regarding the history of the independent black churches, the most plausible conclusion is that black leaders were directing the church and recruiting membership. It is clear, in any event, that the Petersburg churches were given more leeway than the state government would have liked.

The black congregations did not receive a white pastor until 1837, when the Reverend William Southwood agreed to shepherd them. The association minutes recorded that, until Southwood became their minister, they had received aid “in teaching, exhorting, and admonishing” from the white Market Street Church.⁷⁷ While the white church did paternalistically oversee the two black churches, the latter still worshipped independently. In 1838, the members of the Gillfield Church attempted to expand their level of independence by requesting that they be allowed to send their own black delegates to the associational meetings. Although the motion was “*unanimously* rejected,” it is interesting that the black congregation attempted to assert itself in the councils of the church—hardly the behavior of a cowed population.⁷⁸

During the next several years, the Portsmouth Association continued to tighten its control over the black churches. In 1838, the body passed several resolutions concerning the religious instruction of blacks, declaring that “it is our duty, as Christians, to be conformed to the laws of our country, and to do all in our power to influence our

⁷⁷ PBA minutes, 1835, 10.

⁷⁸ PBA minutes, 1838, 6.

servants, and all who may be in any way affected by our example, to walk according to the rule of the Apostles, and subject themselves to the powers that be.” They further resolved that they would refuse to include black churches within the association unless those congregations were under the leadership of a white pastor who was also a member of the nearest white Baptist church.⁷⁹

Clearly, the Portsmouth Association was more serious about enforcing the legislation of 1832 and adopting a domineering attitude toward black churches than was the Dover Association. Yet even the Portsmouth Association was very slow to implement the law and, like the Dover Association, proved unwilling to disempower black fellow Baptists. In 1842, a delegate from the Gillfield Church presented this query to the Portsmouth Association: “Is a slave eligible to the office of a Deacon, in a coloured church?” The association voted in the affirmative, thus extending religious responsibility to individual slaves.⁸⁰ In 1828, that same question had been asked of the Dover Association, which also approved (see page 22). These two rulings demonstrate a consistency, not a deterioration, in the relationship between black and white Baptists following Turner’s rebellion. Slaves were encouraged, not forbidden, to exercise religious leadership over their congregations. Historians have made it clear that white churches adopted more of a supervisory role over black congregations during the 1830s and 1840s. But in emphasizing this fact, they have obscured the significant amount of continuity that existed as well.

In an article published in 1998, historian Charles Irons challenged the traditional understanding of black and white religious relations in Virginia. By studying the records

⁷⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

⁸⁰ PBA minutes, 1842, 13.

of the First African Baptist Church of Richmond, Irons revealed a remarkable level of autonomy among black Baptists in the mid-nineteenth century. His research on this church undermines his later claim that, after 1832, whites “cursed” the religious freedoms they had given to slaves, an argument that he advances in his later dissertation. (see page 4, above).

First African was an offshoot of the biracial First Baptist Church. When the number of slaves and free blacks began to heavily outnumber white membership, white leaders decided to form a separate black church, donating their old building to the black Baptists in 1841. White and black members agreed that the religious and social needs of the large number of free blacks and slaves were different from those of whites. Due to the legislation of 1832, First African had to operate under the direction of a white pastor. Yet Irons demonstrates that white and black Baptists subtly undermined the laws whenever possible. The black congregation, for instance, still maintained power through the deaconry. In 1842, they elected thirty black deacons, who served to advise and assist the white pastor, Robert Ryland. The deacons also acted as intermediaries between the congregation, the pastor, and the larger community—virtually “a de facto representative government for the city’s African Americans.”⁸¹ Highly respected by whites and blacks Baptists alike, the office of deacon should not be overlooked when evaluating blacks’ ability to maintain leadership after 1832.

The members of First African refused to allow the legislation to suppress their worship. According to Irons, Richmond blacks dodged the laws against black preaching by employing prayer as a method of preaching—“extending prayers into long, instructive

⁸¹ Charles F. Irons, “And All These Things Shall Be Added Unto You: The First African Baptist Church, Richmond, 1841-1865,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 47:1 (Winter 1998): 32.

sermonettes, which individual members of the congregation could lead.”⁸² In the middle of a worship service any man who felt called could stand and exhort his brethren through passionate intercession. This practice demonstrated black Baptists’ adeptness at overcoming legislation banning black preaching and their determination to exercise their faith freely. As in the Dover Association, white Baptist leaders often helped blacks to undermine the law. Knowing full well that blacks were attempting to preach to the congregation in public prayers, Ryland did nothing to stop them. And, in 1848, he pushed the limits of the law by writing and distributing *The Scripture Catechism, for Coloured People*, encouraging black people to learn to read Scripture.⁸³ According to the legislation of that year, Ryland could have been imprisoned for six months and fined \$100.00 if he assembled slaves and free blacks to teach them reading and writing. Whether he instructed them in groups or merely distributed the catechism is unknown. He continued to pastor the church unhampered until 1865. Either he was skilled at keeping church activities secret, or, more likely, the laws were not strictly enforced. Some members of the Dover Baptist Association likewise undermined the law, through criticism and petition. One petitioner, R. Gwathmey, encouraged Baptists leaders to “procure a modification of the laws as would remove all restraint from the prudent exertion to teach the African race to read the Bible.”⁸⁴ Ryland was not alone in his support of educated, autonomous, and unfettered black Christianity.

The *Religious Herald*, a Baptist newspaper founded in Richmond in 1828, further illustrates the evangelical perspective concerning religious activity among blacks after Nat Turner’s rebellion. When some newspapers labeled Turner as a Baptist preacher, the

⁸² Irons, “And All These Things,” 29.

⁸³ Ibid.

Herald reacted by dissociating the denomination from the rebel: “He never was a member of the Baptist or any other church; he assumed that character of his own accord.—This contradiction gives us pleasure, for tho’ every denomination is liable to be disgraced by impostors, yet we are glad that Christianity has not been injured by the admission of so ruthless a miscreant, within the bosom of a Christian church.”⁸⁵ Eager to uphold the cause of Christianizing African Americans, the *Herald* published several defenses of the practice in the coming months. Answering a query as to whether blacks should be excluded from churches, the *Herald* replied: “We sympathize with our friends in Southampton, but we can see no propriety in excluding the innocent from the church, because a few desperate wretches committed murder.” The article continued by demonstrating how Christianity would prevent slave unrest: “If any situation in life be more likely to engender diabolical thoughts and plans for insurrection than another it is that of excluded members from our churches.”⁸⁶

The *Herald* defended religious instruction from a theological perspective as well: “Negroes, in common with white people, have immortal souls, and they are in the same sinful state that we are. We have good evidence that God renews the souls of negroes, and saves them by grace.”⁸⁷ In January of 1832, the *Herald* printed a passionate rebuttal to a letter written by ‘Humanitus,’ who had accused Baptists of “fanatical zeal” in opposing “laws for the better government of our coloured population.” The editors rebutted by making a distinction between true and false Christianity: “True religion never

⁸⁴ DBA Minutes, Oct. 12-14, 1850, 11.

⁸⁵ *Religious Herald*, Sept. 9, 1831.

⁸⁶ *Religious Herald*, Oct. 14, 1831.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

made a slave disobedient to his master.”⁸⁸ The *Herald* argued that in Christianizing blacks, Baptists fulfilled their duty to God, and were not in disobedience to the government. To Baptists, the *absence* of religion was the heart of the problem.

The state government continued to curtail black rights in the years following the rebellion. In 1834, free blacks were forbidden to migrate into Virginia. Any free black who had left the state to obtain an education would not be permitted to return, according to a law of 1838. Ten years later, the legislature reinforced earlier restrictions placed on free blacks. If a freed person did not leave the state within one year of his emancipation, the state reserved the right to sell him as a slave. That same year, the state prohibited all blacks, slave or free, from meeting for instruction in reading and writing. Legislators feared the supposedly incendiary combination of educated free blacks, exposed to abolitionist ideas in the North, and literate slaves.⁸⁹ White Baptists like Robert Ryland, however, believed that education was crucial to a person’s acceptance of the gospel message, and therefore risked punishment in order to promote it.

In 1848, the editors of the *Herald*, expressed their disgust over the impending restrictions:

The restrictions in reference to the religious privileges of the colored population are more rigid in Virginia, than in any other Southern State. In all others, colored persons are permitted to preach; and in Georgia and in New Orleans, they officiate as pastors of colored churches. That some mediation is necessary, is apparent from the fact, that, by the present law, the presence of a single slave at a night meeting in our city, renders the whole congregation of white persons liable to imprisonment. Such an absurd law can never be enforced, and ought not to have a place on the criminal code.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *Religious Herald*, Jan. 20, 1832.

⁸⁹ Guild, ed., *Black Laws*, 109, 112, 117, 178-79.

⁹⁰ *Religious Herald*, June 15, 1848.

The Dover Baptist Association openly opposed the new laws: “We would...recommend to our brethren to use all proper means to procure such a modification of the laws as would remove all restraint from the prudent exertion to teach the African race to read the Bible, and instruct them in those things which belong to their everlasting weal.”⁹¹ Pastor Ryland, a member of the Dover Association, had taken one step further by authoring a catechism for blacks. These Baptists valued salvation, more than racial control, as their ultimate goal.

Sharing one of Governor Floyd’s concerns, Baptists did believe that abolitionist literature could incite insurrection. The Dover Baptist Association scorned abolitionist activities:

We view with feelings of deep regret, and decided disapprobation, the course which has been pursued by the Northern Abolitionists, as being calculated, in our esteem, to excite discontent and insubordination among the slaves, to destroy the peace of the community, and even to injure the interests of those for whose welfare those misguided men profess to be laboring.⁹²

The association viewed abolitionists, more than the slaves or free blacks themselves, as the culprits behind rebellion. Although they agreed on the need to suppress abolitionist literature, however, Governor Floyd and the Baptists parted ways when it came to the role of religion in the lives of black Virginians. To Floyd, religion was the source of insurrection, to Baptists, the solution.

By not recognizing the discrepancy between state legislation and the Baptist reaction, historians have provided superficial analyses of the insurrection’s aftermath. On paper, black freedoms appear to have been suppressed and independent black worship eliminated. Historians have taken legislation as a true reflection of daily life throughout

⁹¹ DBA minutes, Oct. 12-14, 1850.

⁹² DBA minutes, Sept. 29-30, 1835.

Virginia. Upon studying Baptist association minutes and the events that actually occurred among black Baptists in Williamsburg and Petersburg, a new conclusion emerges. Three of the largest black Baptist churches in Virginia continued to operate actively throughout the 1830s. Instead of recognizing this fact, past histories have viewed the rebellion's aftermath as Governor Floyd wished it had been. The wealth of resources that Floyd preserved, including letters, a diary, and a scrapbook of incendiary materials, have made his perspective easily accessible. Baptist sources, however—association minutes, the Baptist *Religious Herald*, and the records of free black preacher John Dipper—have not been incorporated into past studies of the insurrection. When both sets of responses are given adequate attention, the ideological struggle between the legislative and ecclesiastical bodies, along with the tension between law and everyday practice, becomes apparent. Baptists perceived racial order as compatible with spiritual equality. Heavenly duty superseded racial restrictions. Their subtle but firm opposition to state legislation muffled the death knell for black rights that emanated from Richmond in 1832. By the time it reached Williamsburg and Petersburg, the soft echo could hardly shake the African Baptist congregations.

CHAPTER 2: THE METHODIST DEBATE: NORFOLK

From its beginnings, Methodism both resembled and contrasted significantly with the theology and practice of the Baptists. Around 1730, John Wesley, an Anglican clergyman, founded a “Holy Club” with his brother Charles and other students at Merton College, Oxford. The purpose of the club was to encourage the members to practice “holy living”—rising early for prayer and study, eschewing worldly entertainment, selflessly aiding the poor, and systematically planning every moment of one’s day for the Lord’s service. Observers and critics labeled the pious group the “Methodists” for their exacting discipline. Unlike the seventeenth-century dissenting sects, such as the Puritans and Baptists, the Methodists supported the established Church, “favoring the rites and rituals of Anglicanism.” Yet, like the dissenters, they were well known for “stressing austerity and self-denial.”⁹³ Methodism was something of a hybrid, then, between Anglican hierarchy and liturgy, and evangelical discipline and passionate worship.

One of the early trademarks of Methodism was a remarkable fervor for missionary activity. In the late 1730s, Wesley joined clergyman George Whitefield in his widespread preaching career across England, Scotland, and Ireland, fueling the “Great Awakening” in Britain and its colonies. Theological disagreements began to surface between the two men, however, particularly concerning the issue of free will. Wesley strongly believed that people accepted salvation through choice, while Whitefield

⁹³ Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

contended that God's grace was bestowed from above by God's own choosing. The two preachers parted ways in the 1740s. Whitefield made several tours throughout the American colonies during the next three decades, winning thousands of converts to emotional, invigorated "heart religion."

While also exhorting crowds to experience the new birth, Wesley focused on the British Isles, training an army of lay preachers drawn from the middling and lower classes. In the 1760s, many of these preachers migrated to the colonies as settlers and missionaries. In its earliest years, American Methodism consisted primarily of household meetings and was not a serious competitor with other developing sects such as the Baptists. In the 1770s, Methodism was further hindered in America by the stigma of its ties to Britain and the Anglican Church. After the Revolutionary War, however, the membership increased dramatically as preachers tirelessly inspired revivals from New York to Virginia. By the late eighteenth century, Methodism was firmly entrenched in American Christianity, and, with the Baptists, was quickly becoming one of the largest denominations in the Early Republic.⁹⁴

The emotional character of Methodism's "heart religion," like that of the Baptists, strongly appealed to free blacks and slaves. By 1786, blacks constituted ten percent of the burgeoning denomination.⁹⁵ Most of the black membership was concentrated in the Middle Atlantic states, from New York to northern Maryland, but itinerant preachers did travel extensively in the South as well, recruiting black converts on plantations and in towns.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 22-62.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 62.

The Methodist Church adopted an amalgam of democracy and hierarchy to oversee the expansive circuits of the traveling preachers. The General Conference served as the highest legislative body, establishing and distributing regulations such as the Methodist *Discipline* to regional bishops and elders. Because, like their Anglican forebears, Methodists valued the hierarchy of bishops, elders, and deacons, they adopted the title of Methodist *Episcopal* Church. Regional conferences—such as the Virginia or Baltimore Conferences—and local districts—such as the Norfolk District—subdivided the General Conference. Leaders of the local districts would meet on a quarterly basis and would send representatives to the annual meetings of their regional conferences. Delegates from each region were then selected to attend the General (national) Conference, which convened every four years.⁹⁶ Until about the 1820s, Methodist ministers remained largely mobile, and were generally young and unmarried.⁹⁷ Only bishops were authorized to ordain itinerant ministers and assign their circuits. District leaders could license local preachers and exhorters. In ascending order, the district hierarchy consisted of exhorters, preachers, deacons, and elders. Local preachers were licensed by the Conference to preach, meet with church groups, and visit the sick. They were not permitted to administer the sacraments. Exhorters, holding the lowest rank in the Methodist hierarchy, served as preachers in the absence of an ordained clergy

⁹⁶ Reginald F. Hildebrand, “Methodist Episcopal Policy on the Ordination of Black Ministers, 1784-1864,” *Methodist History* 20 (1982), 126 n. 5.

⁹⁷ In *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, Christine Heyrman discusses the transformation of the itinerancy from an order of youthful bachelors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to one of older, family-oriented pastors in the antebellum period. Heyrman argues that this transformation was part of the larger “softening” of Methodism, in which the denomination adopted cultural standards and values in order to attract members.

member.⁹⁸ In contrast to the independent churches that composed Baptist Associations, the Methodist denomination should be thought of as a *central* church with many subordinate arms. Individual Methodist churches lacked the sovereignty found in the Baptist denomination.

Due to these contrasting church structures, Baptists and Methodists approached the issue of slavery and black religious leadership quite differently. Simply put, the contrast is one of a bottom-up versus a top-down mentality. African Baptist Churches organized independently, and then applied for membership into the white-led associations. Along with black churches, integrated congregations disciplined their slave and free black (and white) members as they saw fit, with some advice and monitoring from the associations. In contrast, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church dictated leadership roles, disciplinary codes, and racial policy through their meetings and the circulation of the Methodist *Discipline*. Local preachers and individual congregations, whatever their views on race and slavery, held little autonomy to exercise them. The records of the General Conference, along with those of regional districts, reveal that the Methodist Church was deeply divided on the issue of slavery from the start.

John Wesley and other early Methodist leaders detested slavery. In the early 1780s, many Methodists had actively pursued abolition in Pennsylvania, and helped to legalize manumission in most Southern states during the next twenty years. In 1785, Bishops Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke included the antislavery stance within the Methodist *Discipline*, denouncing the system as “contrary to the Golden Law of

⁹⁸ Hildebrand, “Methodist Episcopal Policy,” 125 n. 4; Hildebrand, “‘An Imperious Sense of Duty’: Documents Illustrating an Episode in the Methodist Reaction to the Nat Turner Revolt” *Methodist History*

God...and the unalienable Rights of Mankind.”⁹⁹ The General Conference declared in 1787 that all slaveholding Methodists must emancipate those they held in bondage. Yet despite the efforts of early leaders such as Wesley, Coke, and Asbury, Virginia Methodists strongly objected to the ruling on emancipation, and, within six months, General Conference leaders withdrew it from the *Discipline*. The General Conference decided that it would be best for district quarterly meetings and regional conferences to regulate the practice, thus opening a gap between Northern and Southern Methodists that would continue to expand until the denomination split in 1844-1845.¹⁰⁰

During the 1790s, the General Conference continued to equivocate on the issue of slavery. In 1796, representatives agreed that the system was evil and that church members should be encouraged to free their slaves. They ruled that no slaveholder could be admitted to the church until he conversed with a preacher about the subject. The General Conference continued to prohibit the buying and selling of slaves, but loosened its stance against those who already owned slaves. At the meeting in 1800, the debate continued to rage between slaveholding and antislavery Methodists. The Conference upheld a denominational ruling of 1796 that slaveholding preachers would forfeit their offices unless they emancipated their slaves.

Following Gabriel’s rebellion later that year, the divisions within the Conference became even more apparent. In 1804, the General Conference retained the rulings of

19 (1981), 167 n. 5.

⁹⁹ Andrews, *The Methodists*, 123-126. Quotation from Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of Several Conversations Between The Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., The Rev. Francis Asbury and Others, at a Conference Begun in Baltimore...Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and Other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia, 1785), 14, in Andrews, *The Methodists*, 126.

¹⁰⁰ Andrews, *The Methodists*, 126; Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Church in the United States of America, Vol. II: The Planting and Training of American Methodism* (New York; Carlton and Porter,

1796 for Virginia and the Northern states, but resolved that “the members of our societies in the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia shall be exempted” from the regulations restricting slaveholding. The Conference also declared that preachers should “from time to time, as occasion serves, admonish and exhort all slaves to render due respect and obedience to the commands and interests of their respective masters.” Four years later, the General Conference formally gave control of the matter to regional conferences, authorizing different sections of the church to make their own regulations concerning the practice of buying and selling slaves.¹⁰¹

This series of equivocations and retractions tends to support the depiction in Christine Heyrman’s *Southern Cross* of Southern white evangelicals embracing racism and slavery. Yet, viewed another way, the rulings of the General Conference demonstrated not a one-way acceptance of slavery and a wholesale adoption of dominant cultural mores, but a growing rift between conservatives—Northern and Southern alike—who wanted the church to accept slavery, and antislavery Methodists who defended the church’s founding principles. The small minority of Northern conservatives was centered in the regional conferences of New York, New Jersey and Baltimore. Radical antislavery Methodists most often came from the New England Conferences. Historian Shelton H. Smith argues that this divide between conservatives and radicals had existed since the early years of American Methodism, for “the demon of slavery was already steadily

1866), 200; and Shelton H. Smith, *In His Image But...Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 40-43.

¹⁰¹ L.M. Hagood, *The Colored Man in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, reprint of 1890 edition (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 22-33, quotations on 32 and 33; Andrews, *The Methodists*, 127.

capturing the ecclesiastical bodies in the South before the advent of the nineteenth century.”¹⁰²

Despite the rise of independent African Methodist Episcopal churches in major cities throughout the antebellum period, most Southern blacks continued to remain part of the Methodist Episcopal Church—a Church that remained hobbled and confused by the slave system.¹⁰³ At the General Conference meeting of 1816, a committee was formed to discuss the Church’s relationship to slavery. Composed of one representative from each of the Church’s nine regional conferences, the committee included Southerners Cannellum H. Hines of Virginia and Daniel Asbury of South Carolina. Upon studying and discussing Southern legislation, the committee lamented that “under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice.” Declaring that “the evil appears to be past remedy,” the committee admitted defeat: “in the South and West the civil authorities render emancipation impracticable, and...[the committee members] are constrained to admit that to bring about such a change in the civil code as would favour the cause of liberty is not in the power of the General Conference.”¹⁰⁴ To many Methodists, slavery had become a *civil* issue, and they felt helpless to stop it.

By the late 1820s, many white Methodist leaders, both Northern and Southern, had accepted slavery and were attempting to use it to the advantage of the gospel. They

¹⁰² Smith, 69.

¹⁰³ As the General Conference increasingly retracted its stance on slavery in the early nineteenth century, the Philadelphia black preacher Richard Allen and his followers determined that an entirely separate denomination was needed. They formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, and Allen became its first bishop. The AME Church—along with a similar denomination from New York, the AME Zion Church—gained most of its membership from mid-Atlantic cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore. Within the next couple of decades, AME Churches sprang up in Charleston and Norfolk as well. Hildebrand, “Methodist Episcopal Policy,” 124-129; Andrews, *The Methodists*, 139-54.

¹⁰⁴ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, I, 1816, 169-170.

developed a “Mission to the Slaves,” which demonstrated the dual, conflicted character of evangelicalism’s relationship to slavery. According to historian Donald Mathews, the mission was “the South’s conscientious alternative to antislavery activity”—an effort to evangelize the slaves in part by bolstering the South’s economic and cultural structure.¹⁰⁵ While they bowed to the legality of slavery, Methodists, through the mission, did develop “the only institution in the South which could and did work for the Negroes.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, the mission was essentially a manifestation of the unresolved moral struggle that plagued the Church. Most Southern Methodists agreed that slavery was unfortunate, but since they believed themselves powerless to end it, they decided to make the most of it for the sake of Christ and the enslaved.¹⁰⁷ Upon studying the journals of early Methodist leaders including Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, Historian Eugene Southall well described the dilemma of Southern Methodist preachers: “inward, no doubt, they rebelled against the existence in the Church of such an evil, but they too realized that to follow any other than a compromise course would mean their expulsion from that section in which they could best serve the Negro.”¹⁰⁸ Leaders such as Asbury and Coke believed that salvation, not emancipation, was the evangelical’s ultimate goal. The preachers who followed Asbury’s example would compromise the Church’s stance on slavery in order to gain entrance to the plantation.

Of course, not all Southern preachers thought of the slaves’ souls first. Many were attempting to build relationships with powerful slaveholders, seeking to improve

¹⁰⁵ Donald G. Mathews, “The Methodist Mission to the Slaves, 1829-1844” *Journal of American History* 51 (Mar. 1965), 615.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Donald G. Mathews, “Religion and Slavery—The Case of the American South,” in *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher, eds. (Folkestone, Eng.: W. Dawson, 1980), 220.

their own status and careers along with that of the Methodist Church. Such is the perspective that Heyrman portrays—a church so caught up in the Southern system of honor and slavery that blacks occupied the preachers' least priority. Yet Mathews offers an alternative, and equally valid, interpretation. In ministering to the slave, preachers consistently emphasized “his humanity...chipping away almost unconsciously at the legal conception of the slave as property and therefore blunting the logical extension of the law.” The message of the gospel was powerful, even when preached under the watchful eye of white slaveholders. The mission must therefore be understood as a “moral paradox,” advancing the slave’s spiritual condition and aiming to improve his or her treatment, while simultaneously supporting the system that degraded the bondperson’s earthly status.¹⁰⁹

Thus, at the time of the Nat Turner’s revolt in 1831, the Methodist Episcopal Church was a divided, disoriented body in its relationship to slavery. Not wishing to sanction the practice as morally permissible, but also desiring fellowship with slaveholders, Southern Methodist leaders attempted to justify the institution as beneficial for the enslaved. They argued that a properly led and supervised Christianity would make slaves more docile and respectful, rather than excite in them thoughts of equality or rebellion. Southern Methodist preachers were by no means a uniform group. Some had the interests of the slaves genuinely at heart, while others were guided by restrictive legislation, cultural mores, or the opportunity for personal gain. Even among those who sincerely valued the spiritual welfare of blacks, there was much disagreement on how to approach the new laws that followed the Southampton insurrection. They wondered

¹⁰⁸ Eugene Portlette Southall, “The Attitude of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Toward the Negro from 1844 to 1870,” *Journal of Negro History* 16 (Oct. 1931), 364.

whether resisting or ignoring the laws would help or hinder the spiritual development of free blacks and slaves. Nowhere did this disagreement manifest itself as dramatically as in southeastern Virginia.

Reginald Hildebrand, a historian of Methodism, has assembled and edited two remarkable petitions of protest that demonstrate the extent of ecclesiastical division in Virginia. In 1981, he published the documents in the journal *Methodist History*. His editorial footnotes on the petitions are quite extensive. They provide a wealth of information about the structure of the Church, the population of the Norfolk District, the Methodist *Discipline*, and the lives of the individual petitioners—such as their positions in the Church and how many slaves they owned. Still, the footnotes offer only background information rather than interpretation. In his introduction to the documents, Hildebrand does note briefly that, “given the near hysterical temper of the times, it is interesting that seven white Methodists fought [a certain] elder’s rulings [barring preaching by slaves] until they had exhausted every level of appeal.”¹¹⁰ This short commentary, however, does not extract the full significance of these documents. The petitions are more than “interesting”; they are an important, and little known, refutation of past historians’ claims of a white consensus against black preaching following Turner’s rebellion. An in-depth study of these documents, coupled with the Baptist research presented in the previous chapter, will challenge Hildebrand’s assumption—shared by Cromwell, Aptheker, Oakes, and Irons—that the post-Turner period was uniformly “hysterical.”

¹⁰⁹ Mathews, “Methodist Mission,” 621, 630.

¹¹⁰ Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 155.

The bulk of this chapter relies heavily on the petitions and on the biographical detail that Hildebrand provides concerning the Norfolk debate. Unfortunately, surviving Methodist sources are far fewer and more difficult to find than Baptist sources. The Virginia Baptist Historical Society in Richmond houses an abundance of antebellum Baptist sources, all organized and easily searchable. No such central archive exists for Virginia Methodists during the period in question. Thus, I have taken advantage of the fact that these two fascinating petitions have been discovered and published. They provide crucial support to my overall argument, and, until now, have been unincorporated into a larger study of Southern evangelicalism after Nat Turner.

Three months after the Turner insurrection, Thomas Crowder, the presiding elder of the Norfolk Station District, refused to renew the licenses of three slave preachers, Laban Sheppard, Jeffery Tatem, and Lewis Sheppard. The Norfolk District had similar numbers of black and white members. In 1831, the district reported 296 blacks and 314 whites; a year later, there were 305 blacks and 346 whites. As in the Baptist denomination, the black-white ratio was more balanced in southeastern Virginia than in most other areas of the state: the Virginia Conference as a whole reported 8,210 blacks and 32,536 whites in 1832.¹¹¹ Thus, in the region surrounding Southampton County, whites were well acquainted with black Methodist worshippers, exhorters, and preachers. In fact, in May of 1831, the Monumental Methodist Church of Portsmouth donated its former church building to black Methodists, who continued to worship there long after

¹¹¹ Ibid., 170 n. 17.

the rebellion. On the local level, ties between many black and white evangelicals were still strong, even after Turner's revolt.¹¹²

As a presiding elder, Crowder embraced caution following the insurrection. He anticipated the legislation against black preaching that would be passed in March 1832 and thought it in the best interest of the Church that slaves be forbidden to preach. Crowder's reaction is consistent with historians' myriad accounts of the racial hysteria that supposedly wracked Virginia after the rebellion, and also with their discussions of the nineteenth-century shift in the Church's attitudes toward slavery. These portrayals leave no room for Southern white dissenters—so it comes as a surprise that a group of Southern white Methodist leaders passionately challenged Crowder's ruling, and that they appealed to each level of the Methodist hierarchy in an attempt to revoke his decision. In February 1832, these prominent men presented an eloquent and emotional protest to the Virginia Annual Conference, which was then convening in Norfolk. Declaring it their “imperious sense of Duty from which it would be cowardice to Shrink,” they invoked Scripture and the Methodist *Discipline* to craft a bold and forceful defense of black preachers.¹¹³

In order to determine whether or not to renew preaching licenses, Quarterly Conferences would annually examine the character of local preachers and exhorters. Although the Methodist *Discipline* did sanction the ordination of blacks as deacons in 1800, most black Methodist leaders remained within the ranks of local preachers or exhorters. The *Discipline* allowed that “coloured preachers and official members shall

¹¹² James Hodges Toomer, “History of Monumental: A Few Facts Connected with the Rise and Progress of Methodism in Portsmouth,” Nov. 1872, Records of Monumental Methodist Church, Portsmouth, in Library of Virginia.

have all the privileges which are usual to others in the district and quarterly conferences, where the usages of the country do not forbid it.”¹¹⁴ It also stipulated the necessary qualifications of a preacher:

Do they know God as a pardoning God? Have they the love of God abiding in them? Do they desire nothing but God? And are they holy in all manner of conversation?

Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work? Have they (in some tolerable degree) a clear, sound understanding, a right judgement in the things of God, a just conception of salvation by faith? And has God given them any degree of utterance? Do they speak justly, readily, clearly?

Have they any fruit? Are any truly convinced of sin, and converted to God, by their preaching?

As long as these three marks concur in any one, we believe he is called of God to preach. These we receive as sufficient proof that he is moved by the Holy Ghost.¹¹⁵

The real issue for Virginia Methodists concerned the *Discipline*’s qualification: “where the usages of the country do not forbid it.” Up until March 1832, the “usages of the county” did not prohibit blacks from preaching in Virginia. After Governor Floyd’s address was published in early December, however, it became clear that some type of restriction would soon be placed on black preachers. At its meeting in December 1831, the Norfolk Quarterly Conference examined and approved the moral character of Laban Sheppard, Jeffery Tatem, and Lewis Sheppard. The licenses of Sheppard and Tatem as exhorters, and that of Sheppard as a local preacher, had been renewed a year earlier during a meeting of the Quarterly Conference. Yet now that body, even as it again endorsed the three black men’s character following the insurrection, “for no other cause

¹¹³ “A Memorial to the Virginia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” c. Feb. 23, 1832, in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 156.

¹¹⁴ M.E. Church, *Discipline*, 188, in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 168 n. 8.

¹¹⁵ M.E. Church, *Discipline*, 43-44, in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 169 n. 11.

than that they were slaves” let their licenses lapse.¹¹⁶ The Quarterly Conference was acting in anticipation of the new legislation.

White Methodists Ethelred Drake, Cary W. Butt, Francis Butt, Jr., James Bryan, Horatio N. Bucktrout, Joshua Williamson, and William McKenney, all from the Norfolk area or the surrounding counties, called the Norfolk Conference to task for “violating...not only the discipline of our church, but that fundamental law of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ which commands us ‘To do unto all men as we would they should do unto us.’”¹¹⁷ A Methodist preacher himself, Drake, who had recently been elected president of the Norfolk Methodist Missionary Society, believed the Quarterly Conference had committed a grave error. What is even more interesting, however, is that Drake was a resident of Nat Turner’s own Southampton County, father of three children under five years old, and owner of two male slaves—a boy under ten and a young man between ten and twenty. Despite the supposed hysteria among white Virginians during the months after the insurrection, this citizen of Southampton County was completely at ease with the idea of black preaching. In fact, he passionately defended the practice.¹¹⁸

The plot thickens as one examines the lives of the other petitioners. Cary W. Butt, elected treasurer of the Norfolk Missionary Society in January 1832, was a resident of Princess Anne County, and father of four children between ages five and fifteen. He owned three slaves, who may have constituted a family—a man between thirty-six and fifty-five, and young woman between ten and twenty-four, and a child under ten. Francis Butt, Jr. lived in Norfolk, was father of four children, and owned a slave girl under the

¹¹⁶ “Memorial to the Virginia Annual Conference,” in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 156.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

age of ten. James Bryan had been elected secretary of the Norfolk Missionary Society in January 1832. Horatio N. Bucktrout, a local preacher, had become an ordained pastor in Princess Anne County in 1831. Little is known about petitioner Joshua Williamson, but he was, no doubt, also a member of the Norfolk Quarterly Conference. William McKenney, elected to the Board of Managers of the Norfolk Missionary Society in January 1832, corresponded regularly with a settler in the nascent colony of Liberia. He was most likely the owner of “W. McKenney & Co.,” a Norfolk store that specialized in “Negro Clothing.” The credentials of these seven white men reveal that they were not radical outliers deviating from mainstream Methodism. They were established, respected leaders. They were deeply involved in church activities, particularly missions and colonization. A few of them held slaves, and they all lived near the site of the insurrection, but none of them were terrified by the possibilities of black preaching and religious activity. They would, in fact, put their reputations at stake to defend it. The lives and actions of these petitioners demonstrate how superficially the rebellion’s religious aftermath has been studied, and how historians have too often accepted the model of the Southern monolith.¹¹⁹

The seven memorialists employed sarcasm, wit, and metaphor to construct a solid defense of the licensing of black preachers. By posing rhetorical questions, they pointed out the fallacies in Crowder’s ruling:

¹¹⁸ Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference; *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald*, Feb. 17, 1832; Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, vol. 9, Population Schedules for Virginia, pt. 19, p. 289, in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 170 n. 18.

¹¹⁹ Butt: *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald*, Feb. 17, 1832; U.S. Census, 1830, Roll 26, p. 296; *Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, 5 vols. (Baltimore, 1897-1904) 5:56. Butt, Jr.: U.S. Census, 1830, Roll 27, p. 396; *Norfolk Directory* (Norfolk, 1806), pp. 10, 72. Bryan: *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald*, Feb. 17, 1832. Bucktrout: M.E. Church, *Minutes*, 1829-1839, pp. 19, 20, 56, 58; Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference, 1833. McKenney: *Norfolk Herald*, Dec. 7, 1831, Feb.

Suppose the Quarterly Conferences should determine not to license or recommend any person who cannot parse a sentence grammatically in Greek or Latin, (and they certainly have as much right, to make a Classical Education a test, as Slavery; and indeed we would say it would be more just, (for one is voluntary or may be acquired, while the other is not,) or forsooth he may be a married man; or does not wear a plain breasted Coat; what would become of the Itinerancy in such a case? Would not its wheels be stopped at once?

They appealed to Methodism's history of defending the slave and urged Methodist leaders not to bow to Southern idols of culture, money, and power: "Shall the Methodist Episcopal Church, exalted in the Estimation of Every Philanthropist for her untiring exertions in ameliorating the condition of the poor unfortunate Slave, descend from her lofty Eminence & be the first to unite with heartless Politicians and interested Slave holders, in depriving [slaves] of their few Religious rights & privileges?"¹²⁰ Their memorial praised the efforts of "Patriots" in the state legislature, including delegates Philip Bolling and Henry Berry, who had attempted to abolish slavery in Virginia. In discussing the institution of slavery, they charged the Quarterly Conference with flagrant hypocrisy:

Is it just to allow our members to trade in human Souls, inhumanely to separate Husbands & wives, parents & Children, and with their clanking irons & heart rending Shrieks, to be forced on board those floating Hells, to be conveyed to a distant land, and there sold in perpetual Slavery in Direct opposition to our discipline; and not allow a black man license to preach when no discipline forbid it? Such inconsistency and partiality we feel Compelled to say is unjust.¹²¹

Conference leaders had violated Methodism's legacy of charity and compassion, the petitioners wrote; they might as well relinquish all their power to the secular government. The Church's unjust decision sent this tacit, shameful message to the state legislature, the petitioners argued sarcastically:

17, 1832; *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, Feb. 17, 1830; *Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald*, Dec. 7, 1831. All in Hildebrand, "Imperious," 171 n. 19-24.

¹²⁰ "Memorial to the Virginia Annual Conference," in Hildebrand, "Imperious," 157.

Gentlemen we acknowledge we have done wrong in licensing these men, not withstanding it is acknowledged by our discipline; and since you are determined to stop them from preaching, we in order to gain your confidence and good opinion, will do it ourselves and save you the trouble & disgrace. We acknowledge your supremacy, and as good citizens will obey any laws you may think proper to pass.¹²²

In resisting the state government, the petitioners called upon Scripture and the Constitutional separation of Church and State. They reminded the Virginia Conference of Peter's words to the high priest in Jerusalem upon being forbidden to preach: "We ought to obey God rather than men."¹²³ They continued by arguing that the state government's pending legislation would be unconstitutional: "The constitution of our country protects us in our religious liberties and no legislature has a right to interfere, or say whom we shall receive as members, or whom we shall vest with ministerial character...as free born Sons of America we never intend to allow any interference." Since Virginia had been the foremost battleground concerning religious freedom in the 1770s and 1780s, when Baptists strongly contended with the state government for a separation of Church and State, one might have expected this argument to touch a nerve among Virginia Christians—yet the seven petitioners were unsuccessful. The Virginia Annual Conference denied their appeal, obliquely ruling that the Conference "had not sufficient evidence before them to justify any decision in the case."¹²⁴

The petitioners refused to surrender. A month later, they brought the case to the highest level of appeal—the General Conference, then meeting in Philadelphia. They charged Thomas Crowder with maladministration, hoping that the Conference would repeal his ruling. During the Quarterly Conference in December, Crowder had allowed

¹²¹ Ibid., 159.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Acts 5:29; Hildebrand, "Imperious," 158.

the Reverend William A. Smith to propose a resolution to deny preaching licenses to slaves and free blacks. According to the petitioners, Crowder had then declared Smith's resolution to be Church law, and therefore assumed the legislative prerogative. Finally, he had directed the Quarterly Conference to consider the resolution as law too. Apparently, most of the Quarterly Conference members obeyed Crowder's decree. Crowder's actions violated the Methodist *Discipline*, because only the General Conference could suspend or dispense with Church legislation. Thus, the memorial brought not only a moral question to the General Conference, but one of proper governance as well. The petitioners had skillfully constructed a case against Crowder, the Quarterly Conference, and the Virginia Conference.¹²⁵

Not only did they invoke Scripture, the Constitution, and the Methodist *Discipline*, but the petitioners also referred to a proud Methodist heritage and compared slavery to a prison. Pointing out the *Discipline*'s requirement that, to be licensed, a preacher must show "fruit," they could not believe that "the General Conference by using that term [fruit] Ever intended that a minister might preach until the injustice or oppression of Enemies might hinder or stop him by throwing him in a Penitentiary or otherwise and then make that injustice & oppression a plea for depriving him of his ministerial character." The memorial continued by appealing to the memory of an early Methodist hero: "Such a thought never Entered the mind of a Methodist conference that the Rev^d Freeborn Garretson ought to be stopped from preaching the Gospel because he was unjustly thrown in a Cambridge jail." Garretson, a tireless evangelist during the founding years of the Methodist Church in America, frequently challenged secular

¹²⁴ Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference, in Hildebrand, "Imperious," 172 n. 31.

authorities by preaching and advocating the dissenting sect. Garretson was also a well-known antislavery activist, so invoking his memory was an appropriate choice here.¹²⁶

The memorial openly espoused racial egalitarianism. The petitioners asked the General Conference to imagine that white men, instead of black men, had been forbidden to preach. They argued that, “having received their authority to preach the Gospel from the Great Head of the church,” white men “would rather go to prison and to death than submit to such oppression.” Why, they demanded, should it be different for black preachers? They again exposed the hypocrisy in the Church’s position: “Are there two Scales of justice one for the white & the other for the black! Or will any one dare say that God does not call black men to preach his Gospel?” Referring to British Parliamentarian William Wilberforce’s efforts to abolish slavery, the petitioners exhorted Methodists to embrace similar philanthropic courage. They believed that the Church could “do more to the abolition of Slavery than any other body either civil or religious in the United States.”¹²⁷ These men refused to ease the Southern conscience by justifying slavery with Scripture, seeking instead to “protect the rights and privileges of our unfortunate Coloured Brethren.”¹²⁸

Despite its severe admonitions and logical arguments, the memorial of the seven was rejected by the General Conference as well. In a resolution on May 26, 1832, the Conference cited three reasons for the denial. First, the petitioners, “being the minority of a quarterly conference,” had no right to appeal the case. Second, unlike the United

¹²⁵ “A Memorial to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” c. May 1832, in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 161-62.

¹²⁶ “Memorial to the General Conference,” in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 164-65; Andrews, *The Methodists*, 127-29.

¹²⁷ “Memorial to the General Conference,” in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 165-66.

¹²⁸ “Memorial to the General Conference,” in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 166.

States Supreme Court, the General Conference was not to function as an appellate body. Finally, the resolution tersely concluded that, “in the opinion of your committee, the decision of the Virginia Conference, sustaining the administration of brother Thomas Crowder, was correct.”¹²⁹ The General Conference, wishing not to interfere with the Virginia ruling adopted a few weeks earlier, washed its hands of the case. The petitioners could do no more. The Methodist Church had once again compromised its original beliefs in order to placate the prevailing culture and government.

What the two memorials reveal, however, is essential in understanding Southern Methodism and the aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion. Just as Virginia state legislators were by no means of one mind when discussing slavery and the status of free blacks, these petitions suggest that Methodists could be found at every point on the racial and legal spectrum. As a whole, the Methodist Church did gradually withdraw from its radical antislavery stance. If one focuses primarily on the decisions of Conference leaders, this conclusion appears blatant and devastating. Yet white Southern dissenters stood in the ranks as well. As an egalitarian wing in the Virginia Conference, seven Norfolk Methodist leaders and preachers demonstrated that even average slaveholders might challenge restrictions on black preaching. In order to form a complete portrayal of the complicated, tortuous history of the Methodist Church, the dissenting voices must be heard.

¹²⁹ M.E. Church, *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1796-1836* (New York, 1855), 414-15, in Hildebrand, “Imperious,” 174 n. 38.

EPILOGUE: DIVISIONS

In 1844, not 1861, Southern evangelicals demonstrated the South's distinctiveness by seceding from the ecclesiastical Union. Foreshadowing the political separation to come, Southern Methodist and Baptist leaders broke from their respective national denominations and established the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Southern Baptist Convention. The same inescapable issue divided both denominations: slavery. When Northern Methodists refused to repeal a long-standing rule that barred slaveholders from the episcopacy, and when Northern Baptists upheld a rule preventing them from becoming missionaries, Southern evangelicals decided that separate dominations were needed. Defending slavery was worth the division. The schisms of 1844 clearly demonstrate what had happened to evangelicalism in the South in the early nineteenth century. The movement that had so fiercely resisted Southern traditions in the eighteenth century was now sacrificed upon the altar of Southern social practice. Slaveholders had created their own religion.

It is imperative to remember, however, that Southern evangelicalism itself was fraught with dissension as well. The slaveholding ethic did eventually prevail, but not without debate and challenge. Even Nat Turner's rebellion of 1831 and the repressive laws it evoked did not lead white Baptist and Methodist leaders toward a consensus barring black preaching. Due to the hierarchical structure of their church governance, Methodist leaders were able to dictate overarching policies more often than Baptists, but to what degree these were respected or enforced is worth studying. Baptist and

Methodist records during the 1830s clearly demonstrate that some, perhaps many, evangelicals refused to adopt John Floyd's perspective on religious activity among blacks. They resented the interference of government in matters of the Church, and they were reluctant to allow state laws to influence ecclesiastical policy.

The Southampton insurrection exposed serious divisions in white Virginia, both political and ecclesiastical. For months after the rebellion, legislators fiercely debated the institution of slavery. The repressive laws of March 1832 expressed a majority view, but certainly not a white consensus. In fact, a sizable minority voted nay—the ban on black preaching passed in the Senate by a vote of nineteen to ten, and in the House of Delegates by a vote of seventy-four to forty-eight.¹³⁰ The citizens of Virginia, like their representatives, were divided as well. Some worried at the prospect of their slaves hearing a black preacher. They feared further slave unrest, even another revolt, and they pleaded with the governor to protect them. Others, even in Southampton County, remained quite at ease among their slaves and continued to encourage their bondpeople's religious development. Many Virginia evangelicals ignored the laws that restricted black religious activity and some challenged those laws outright. Evangelicals, even many who supported slavery, agreed that true Christianity would inspire racial peace and not murderous fanaticism. Within the evangelical community, divisions ran deep. Some Baptists and Methodists still embraced the founding ideals of egalitarianism and antislavery, exhorting their leaders and congregants to embrace blacks as brethren and not property. Others attempted to marshal scriptural evidence to defend slavery, padding

¹³⁰ General Assembly of Virginia, *Journals of the Senate of Virginia*, March 12, 1832; *Journals of the House of Delegates of Virginia*, March 1, 1832, both in the Library of Virginia. During the decision on emancipation, most of the anti-slavery votes come from the counties west of the mountains, but a sizable minority of eastern delegates questioned slavery as well.

their consciences and pockets. And some simply threw up their hands, morally conflicted but ready to accept new restrictions of their black coreligionists.

The reactions of white evangelical Christians in the South to Nat Turner's revolt have received little attention from historians. Yet the responses of evangelicals and the debates among them provide important insights into the character of antebellum Southern society. At least in Virginia, the lines of demarcation between black and white were not absolute, even in the wake of the Nat Turner revolt. The races shared fellowship with each other, and whites in Virginia often overlooked or actively disobeyed repressive legislation to defend blacks' involvement in religious activity and leadership. The post-Turner legal codes represent an important current in white Southern racial thinking. But the minutes and petitions of white evangelicals in Southeastern Virginia tell a far more complicated, and equally important, story.

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