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"By the Dear, Immortal Memory of Washington"/The Baptists, Culture, and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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“By the Dear, Immortal Memory of Washington”/The Baptists, Culture, and the Law in
Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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Bachelor of Arts, College of William & Mary, 2017

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of The College of William & Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Lyon G. Tyler Department of History

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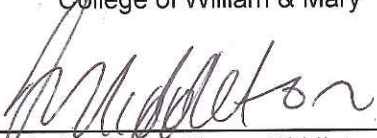


Douglas Peter Breton

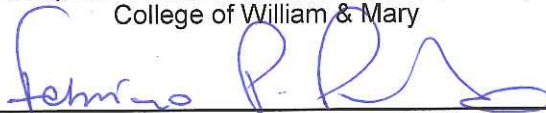
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ABSTRACT

“By the Dear, Immortal Memory of Washington”

Americans have long used the Founding Fathers as symbols of patriotism, invoking their names and using their images whenever they wish to demonstrate that a particular way of thinking or acting is true to American ideals. The vague patriotic image of the founders tends to eclipse their actual character, allowing diverse and competing movements to all use them. This has been especially true of George Washington, who long enjoyed a preeminent and almost mythic status among the founders. During the 1860s, both secessionists and unionists claimed him as their own in order to show that America's chief founder would have supported them. Politicians freely tossed his name about in their speeches, and ordinary citizens in the North and South wrote about carrying forth his legacy once the Civil War began. For this reason, Washington's symbolic status is a significant but frequently ignored factor in understanding American thought at the time of the Civil War.

The Baptists, Culture, and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Virginia

Throughout Virginia's colonial existence, the only established church was the Church of England. By law, all Virginians had to be baptized into it and had to pay taxes to maintain it. But by the middle of the eighteenth century, the colony had acquired a sizeable population of Protestant dissenters. While they disliked the restrictions that the government had placed on their faith, most were content to submit to the law in order to enjoy the benefits of toleration. The Baptists, however, resolutely refused to submit to any law which attempted to control their “God-given” rights to preach and assemble as they felt proper. Rather than moving to the margins of society, the Baptists repeatedly engaged with the Anglican-dominated culture around them, seeking to transform society and bring it more in line with the principles they held sacred. Foremost among these was the conviction that no sincere faith could exist if church membership was compulsory. Throughout the Revolutionary era, the Baptists led the fight for religious freedom, bringing about a complete separation of church and state.

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Intellectual Biography

The two papers in my research portfolio show how my scholarly interests in history have become more focused over the course of the academic year. Following my acceptance into the M.A. program, I was unsure what my area of research would be. I have long been interested in many different parts of American history, ranging from the founding of Jamestown to the United States' involvement in the First World War. Eventually I determined that the Revolutionary War and Civil War eras interested me the most, so I ought to explore both of them in order to determine which suited me better. After learning that my academic advisor would be Professor Sheriff, I decided to start with a topic pertaining to the Civil War. But since I could not completely leave the Revolution behind, I decided to integrate the two by examining the legacy of the Revolutionary War in terms of cultural memory during the Civil War era. This resulted in my first paper: “‘By the Dear, Immortal Memory of Washington’: George Washington in American Memory during the Civil War Era.”

I began my studies of the Revolution's legacy in American patriotism by looking at the Founding Fathers as symbols in the North and South. It was not hard to find speeches and other writings which celebrated Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, or any other prominent Revolutionary leader. In fact, I found too much, so I decided to focus on just one person – George Washington. Looking at the numerous monuments, paintings, and books about him, it is easy to see that for much of the United States' history, its citizens revered Washington as a quasi-divine figure. However, very few historians have studied how Washington's symbolic status was used during the Civil War when both the Union and Confederacy believed they had the right to claim him as the champion of their cause. On one hand, Washington had opposed rebellion against the government during the Whiskey Rebellion and worked to promote national

unity. On the other, Washington was a Southerner and owned slaves until he died. This ambiguity allowed both sides to pick and choose the aspects of his life which supported their political view the best. As is often the case, Washington's actual character was not as important as the one that Americans constructed for him in the mid-nineteenth century. The idealized Washington was the one which unionists invoked to save the Union and secessionists used to champion a second American Revolution. It was the first time I had seriously studied historical memory, and I was amazed by how much more it can influence a people's beliefs and actions than historical fact. I was so fascinated by it that I will readily say that I intend to study memory in other time periods at a future date.

I found researching for this first paper very beneficial, yet the process revealed to me that my scholarly interests in history are not as strong in the Civil War as I had expected. Having spent most of my time as an undergraduate at William and Mary studying colonial North America, I realized that this is where my interests truly lie. As passionate as I had been about writing my honors thesis on Scottish Highland soldiers in the French and Indian War, I suppose I should have realized this sooner. Trying to find another topic which would interest me as much as that did, I thought back to several of the classes I had taken as an undergraduate. I remembered how much I had enjoyed studying religion in colonial Virginia in my NIAHD classes, so I decided that I ought to look for a topic related to that.

After a while, I decided that I should return to a question I had pondered since the summer of 2016. Through an internship at a local history organization, I conducted research into the history of Loudoun County, Virginia during the eighteenth century. I remember being very surprised to discover that at that time, Loudoun did not have any Anglican churches even though Anglicanism was the official religion of Virginia at that time. However, it was filled with

Quaker, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Baptist houses of worship. This made me wonder, how did religious dissent flourish in spite of state support for the Church of England? I was especially curious about the Baptists since I remembered hearing that they frequently came into conflict with the Anglican establishment and were often imprisoned for their opposition to legal restrictions on religious practices. Moreover, since I was brought up in a Baptist church and have belonged to the Baptist Collegiate Ministry at William and Mary for three years, I have a deep interest in the history of this religious group. For these reasons, studying the Baptists in eighteenth-century Virginia seemed like a perfect topic.

When I began my research, I believed everything I had previously heard about Virginia Baptists in that time period, namely that they were poor, uneducated, and generally confined to the geographical and societal fringes of the colony. But as I began researching, I came across Jewel Spangler's *Virginians Reborn* and discovered that as pervasive as these beliefs about Baptists are, they are not entirely true. While the Anglicans stereotyped them in this fashion and the Baptists themselves embraced these characteristics to emphasize their humble Christian lifestyle, many of their leaders were in fact well-educated and connected in some fashion with elites. Building on this, I came to believe that in spite of what some existing literature suggested, the Baptists did not want to separate from the dominant culture around them but rather engaged with it in order to bring it more in line with their beliefs. After having a very fortuitous conversation with Fred Anderson, the former executive director of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society at a local church, I decided that this was a valid argument and proceeded forward with complete confidence.

These papers differ greatly not only in terms of subjects and chronological periods but also in terms of how I researched for them. For my paper on Washington's symbolic legacy, I

found few secondary sources that directly studied this topic, but I came across many primary sources which showed how prevalent Washington's name and image were. For my paper on the Baptists, I found quite a few useful secondary sources, but primary sources proved difficult to access. If I were to refine these papers for future publication, I would narrow my sources on Washington even further, only looking at how politicians and common citizens used him on the eve of the Civil War in speeches and writings as an emblem of their political causes. I would also track down the numerous materials relating to Virginia Baptists which are in archives around the state. I regret that I did not have the time or resources to look at them during the span of a single semester. If my paper on Baptists were to be published in the form of an article, I would keep the focus on their political participation. However, if in the future I could expand it into a book, I would examine their initial opposition to slavery in greater depth since they moved away from this stance as their denomination became larger in the 1790s and early 1800s. Both of these topics interest me quite a bit, and I am sure that I will be researching them further in the coming years.

“By the Dear, Immortal Memory of Washington”

George Washington in American Memory during the Civil War Era

On February 22, 1862, Jefferson Davis, who had served as the provisional head of the Confederate States of America for a year, was formally sworn in as the President of the Confederacy beneath the equestrian statue of George Washington at the Capitol Building in Richmond, Virginia. The location and date of this inauguration were not the result of chance. February 22 was George Washington’s birthday, a date which many Americans held in almost equal esteem to the Fourth of July.¹ As the first president of a country which was undergoing its own “revolution,” Davis made as many references to Washington as possible. He began his speech by observing, “On this the birthday of the man most identified with the establishment of American independence, and beneath the monument erected to commemorate his heroic virtues and those of his compatriots, we have assembled to usher into existence the Permanent Government of the Confederate States.”² Davis’s allusions to Washington did not end there. Believing that his new country was in the midst of its own struggle for independence, Davis called for his listeners to turn to Washington and the soldiers who fought alongside him for inspiration. “To show ourselves worthy of the inheritance bequeathed to us by the patriots of the Revolution, we must emulate that heroic devotion which made reverse to them but the crucible in which their patriotism was refined.”³ If this example was followed, Davis was sure that his new country would endure.

¹ Michael F. Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2015), 84

² Dunbar Rowland, ed. *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist, Vol. V*, (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 198

³ *Ibid.*, 202

Davis was not the first public figure who used Washington's birthday as an opportunity to advance a political agenda. Exactly one year earlier in Philadelphia, President-Elect Abraham Lincoln had also paid homage to the "Father of his Country." Standing before Independence Hall, Lincoln reflected on how the struggle to create the United States related to contemporary events.

I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and adopted that Declaration of Independence – I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army, who achieved that Independence... It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance.

So strong was Lincoln's conviction that the country of the Revolutionary generation was a beacon of hope to other nations that he declared, "If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle – I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it."⁴ These words eventually proved prophetic, but at the time they demonstrated his total conviction that it would be better to die than betray the ideals of the Founders. As he told the Pennsylvania General Assembly in Harrisburg later that same day, he made these impromptu patriotic remarks "in connection with that beloved anniversary connected with the history of this country."⁵ For Lincoln, no man could inspire the same feelings of personal sacrifice for American ideals as the man who, in his mind, had done the most to bring about American independence.

⁴ Basler, Roy P., ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. IV* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 240

⁵ *Ibid.*, 244

Although Lincoln and Davis delivered their speeches on the same holiday and drew connections between Washington and contemporary events, they interpreted these in radically different ways. For Jefferson Davis, the legacy of the War of Independence was to continue the revolution by creating a sovereign Southern Confederacy that would once again preserve its peoples' rights. For Abraham Lincoln, it meant that the republic which the Founders created had to be preserved at all costs. Taken together, the speeches demonstrate a peculiarity in rhetoric of the Civil War era. References to the Revolutionary War and the Founding Fathers abound in speeches and writings of the time, but their writers reached no consensus on what these events and individuals represented. No symbol was more significant or more than malleable than George Washington. Having led the United States through the military conflict that brought his country independence, Washington was an obvious idol for Americans in the North and South when they once again found their country in the midst of war. Politicians turned to the precedents Washington set as the first president for guidance, frequently invoking them to depict their opponents as enemies of republican ideals. The many materials that used his name or likeness all demonstrated that although there was significant disagreement as to what cause he would have supported, all agreed that he was the predominant symbol of American patriotism.

George Washington's name and likeness appeared so frequently in the lives of Antebellum Americans that it is not especially surprising that historians have produced diverse studies of his legacy. Nevertheless, as Michael F. Conlin observes, "There is no overarching study of Washington's image. Instead, there has been a flurry of studies on how Americans remembered him immediately after his death in 1799 and in the Early Republic."⁶ A variety of works devoted to understanding the construction of Southern nationalism or the motivations of

⁶ Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 16

Northern soldiers and politicians have mentioned Washington, but none have sought to analyze the overall use of Washington as a symbol during the Civil War. Even Conlin's book *One Nation Divided by Slavery* focuses on the issues involving Washington's image and slavery rather than examining his overall place in American political thought. This paper seeks to fill this gap in the historiography of that time period, demonstrating that Washington was a universal patriotic symbol whom politicians, soldiers, and civilians on both sides used to legitimize and understand their role in the Civil War. While they fought over who had the right to claim him for their own, Americans in the North and South agreed that he was integrally linked to their understanding of American identity.

The American people revered George Washington during his life, but they did not elevate him to mythic status until after his death. A letter John Adams wrote in 1785, two years after the Revolutionary War, testifies to the respect rather than worship which Washington received.

I Glory in the Character of a Washington because I know him to be only an Exemplification of the American Character, I know that the General Character of the Natives of the United states is the same with him and that the prevalence of such sentiments and Principles Produced his Character and preserved it and I know there are thousands of others, who have in them all the essential Qualities, Moral & Intellectual which compose it. if his Character Stood alone, I should value it very little.⁷

For Adams, it was the American character which Washington possessed rather than Washington himself that truly deserved praise. Yet as the years went on, Americans began to hold Washington in higher and higher esteem. Michael F. Conlin contends that Washington was aware of this and “consciously crafted an appropriate image” to promote it.⁸ In doing so, he was perceived as a stabilizing force who could guide the new republic through any threat internal or

⁷ John Adams to John Jebb, 10 September 1785. In *Papers of John Adams*, vol. 17. Gregg L. Lint et al., eds., Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014., 425

⁸ Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 72

external.⁹ Soon after his passing, the Americans who had looked to Washington for counsel would begin to raise him to the rank of a demigod.

The man most responsible for creating the myth of George Washington was Mason Locke Weems, a former minister who had taken on work as a bookseller. In 1800, shortly after Washington's death, Weems realized the commercial possibilities for a biography on the first president and wrote *The Life of Washington*. In order to claim authority on his subject, he claimed to have served as rector of "Mount Vernon Parish" – a parish which, like many details in the book, was pure fiction. Rather than describing Washington in human terms, Weems did all he could to extoll the Washington's triumphs and virtues, portraying him as the man most responsible for achieving American independence. It was a problematic biography, but it sold very well. Weems gave the public the Washington they wanted and began many of the myths which nineteenth-century Americans came to treasure.¹⁰

More than simply entertaining readers with Washington's exploits (including the famous cherry tree episode), Weems used Washington's life to promote his readers to adopt certain views. During a discussion of Washington's patriotism, Weems followed one of Washington's quotes on national unity with a scathing, dramatic criticism of the early republic. "Little did that illustrious patriot suspect, that, in so short a time after his death, the awful idea of DISUNION should have become familiar to the public eye!"¹¹ From this, Weems, the erstwhile clergyman, launched into a sort of sermon to simultaneously deify Washington and issue a holy call for union.

⁹ Paul C. Nagel, *One Nation Indivisible: The Union in American Thought, 1776-1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 224

¹⁰ Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington*, edited by Peter S. Onuf (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), xi-x

¹¹ Weems, *Life of Washington*, 175

O ye favoured countrymen of Washington! your republic is not lost yet; yet there is hope. The arm that wrought your political salvation is still stretched out to save; then hear his voice and live! Hear the voice of the Divine Founder of your republic: 'Little children love one another.' Hear his voice from the lips of his servant Washington: 'Above all things hold dear your NATIONAL UNION; accustom yourselves to estimate its immense, its infinite value to your individual and national happiness.'¹²

While such a passage appears melodramatic to modern readers, it was effective in its time, serving as one of the first books to link Washington to the preservation of the Union. As threats to national unity increased, this appeal would become more and more imperative.

Subsequent generations came to revere Weems's presentation of Washington's life and character, allowing his mythic depiction and Unionist appeal to live on for decades. Many Americans read it at an early age, including Abraham Lincoln. On the day before his speech at Independence Hall on Washington's birthday in 1860, Lincoln told the New Jersey Senate that he had first become acquainted with that state's Revolutionary history by reading Weems's *Life of Washington* in "the earliest days of my being able to read."¹³ In light of his many future uses of Washington's name in speeches dedicated to preserving the Union, it is quite revealing that this was an early influence on him. As Conlin notes, "Schoolchildren were inculcated with the image of the American Cincinnatus from an early age. The *North American Review* noted that it was a truism that Washington's biography ranked as one of the first things every American child learned in school."¹⁴ The widespread study of Washington meant that politicians and private citizens alike learned to love Washington from childhood. For any orator who wished to strike a

¹² Weems, *Life of Washington*, 179

¹³ Basler, Roy P., ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. IV* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 235

¹⁴ Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 74

patriotic chord with an audience, it was only natural to employ the name and deeds of a man whom Americans had learned to love from their schooldays.

In addition to laudatory biographies like Weems's, Antebellum Americans cultivated a love for Washington through their annual observance of Washington's Birthday. Before the creation of Presidents' Day, Washington's Birthday was an important patriotic holiday, second only to the Fourth of July. Observances featured displays of military might, including militia parades and cannon fire, as well as public recitations of Washington's Farewell Address. The yearly reading of this address was important for promoting national unity, and moderates frequently called for its reading in times of sectional crisis to calm the parties involved.¹⁵ This was not without good reason. Among its many counsels, the Farewell Address included several passages that encouraged Washington's contemporaries and posterity to value the preservation of the Union. In one place, Washington described the Union to his fellow citizens as "the Palladium of your political safety and prosperity," and urged them to discourage "the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our Country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts."¹⁶ Elsewhere, he wrote of the Union as "a main prop of your liberty," saying that all who wished to preserve their freedom must support it.¹⁷ His advice struck a chord with his contemporaries and posterity alike, especially when Americans felt that the Union was in danger.

Washington's evident support for national unity made his Farewell Address a popular text among Unionists. In 1832, on the one-hundredth anniversary of Washington's birth, the

¹⁵ Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 84-85

¹⁶ Matthew Spalding and Patrick J. Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), 177

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 179

renowned orator Daniel Webster delivered a speech in which he declared that “the Union was the great object of [Washington’s] thoughts.”¹⁸ Webster’s speech was famous in its time, but less than a quarter century later, another would eclipse it. On February 22, 1856, the 124th anniversary of Washington’s birth, Edward Everett of Massachusetts gave what he called “Oration on the Character of Washington” before the Boston Mercantile Library. Like Weems’s biography, it was a panegyric, lauding Washington’s virtues and placing him at the forefront of America’s struggle for independence. It also employed Washington’s Farewell Address to encourage Unionist sentiments. Everett informed his audiences, “Of all the exhortations which it contains, I scarce need say to you that none are so emphatically uttered, none so anxiously repeated as those which enjoin the preservation of the Union of these States... No one can read the Farewell Address without feeling that this was the thought and this the care which lay nearest and the heaviest upon the noble heart.”¹⁹ It was essentially a new expression of the same sentiments which Weems and Webster had included in their works.

Yet Everett’s speech differed from those of his predecessors by providing a dire interpretation of Washington’s warnings against sectionalism. Speaking in 1856, after the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Everett had witnessed the discord and violence that disunity could produce. If Americans failed to obey Washington’s counsel, Everett warned that the United States would “follow the Old World example and be broken up into a group of independent military powers, wasted by eternal border wars.” Rather than serving as an example to the corrupt, oppressive states of Europe, Everett feared the United States would become akin to them. This would betray George Washington’s entire life work. Should such a

¹⁸ Spalding and Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens*, 146

¹⁹ Edward Everett, *Oration on the Character of Washington* (Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1913), 28

thing ever occur, Everett declared “it may as mournfully as truly be said, that Washington has lived in vain, then the vessels as they ascend and descend the Potomac may toll their bells with new significance as they pass Mount Vernon; they will strike the requiem of constitutional liberty for us – for all nations.” In spite of this bleak outlook, Everett believed there was a glimmer of hope, and this came from Washington. “But it cannot, shall not be... no, by the sacred dust enshrined at Mount Vernon; no, by the dear immortal memory of Washington, –that sorrow and shame shall never be.”²⁰ The climax of the speech gained its power not by simply recapitulating Washington’s earlier warnings but by invoking Washington himself as a cause for remaining united. Through Everett’s words, he had become a complete symbol of the Union.

Had Everett’s February 22, 1856 delivery of the oration been his only one, then the text might have served as no more than a singular example of how one man believed George Washington had tasked posterity with preserving his work. Yet this was not the only time he gave the speech. Between 1856 and 1860, Everett would, by his own estimation, repeat it before audiences across the country 129 times.²¹ This lengthy public speaking tour came about because Everett’s first delivery of his oration coincided with a national movement to preserve Mount Vernon, a tangible relic of Washington that was then falling into disrepair. Beginning in 1853, a national women’s organization called the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association” had sought to purchase the estate and preserve it. Since they lacked the money, Everett began to raise funds for them by donating all the proceeds from his speaking appearances to him. This helped to establish Everett’s “reputation as the leading American orator” in the words of the historian Michael F. Conlin and allowed him to raise one third of the \$200,000 that the MVLA needed to buy the

²⁰ Everett, *Oration on the Character of Washington*, 28

²¹ Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 102; Matthew Mason, “The Sacred Ashes of the First Men” in Michael A. McDonnell et al., eds., *Remembering the Revolution: Memory, History, and Nation Making from Independence to the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 267

property.²² Apart from this initial goal, it also spread the idea of Washington's connection to the Union across the country. No matter whether they lived in the North or the South, Unionists had been the most vocal proponents of preserving Mount Vernon. According to Matthew Mason, they believed that Mount Vernon was practically sacred ground and hoped that by permitting pilgrimages to the property, Americans from all walks of life would realize the "folly and apostasy that disunion would involve." Everett himself used religious terms when describing Mount Vernon, calling it "consecrated soil" and referring to the items associated with it as the "personal relics" of the founder.²³ The sanctity of Mount Vernon transformed his speaking tour into a holy mission which would guarantee Mount Vernon's survival.

Everett's tour firmly linked him with George Washington and Union, so much so that it eventually took him into presidential politics. During the 1860 election, the Constitutional Unionist Party nominated Everett for vice president, believing his skills as an orator and connection with a potent symbol of Unionism would benefit them. In his acceptance speech, he rallied the audience around his cause by reminding them that permitting disunion would dismantle Washington's entire legacy.

Tear down your flag; burn your Capitol; dismiss your navy; disband your army; let our commerce rot; overturn all your monuments, here in Baltimore and everywhere else; give to the flames the once loved record of our fathers' deeds; scatter the sacred dust of Washington ['Never,' 'never,'], teach your boys to forget his name, and never let the pilgrim's foot tread the consecrated groves of Mount Vernon."²⁴

Washington was the only founder whom Everett mentioned by name, and it is telling that the audience cried out when Everett spoke of scattering his "sacred dust." The delegates to the

²² Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 96-102

²³ Mason, "Sacred Ashes," 266-7

²⁴ William B. Hesseltine, ed., *Three Against Lincoln: Murat Halstead Reports the Caucuses of 1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 136

Constitutional Unionist Party's convention chose Everett in part because they "recognized Everett's connection with Washington as a universally acknowledged Unionist talisman."²⁵ Having traveled the country and related so well to his audiences, he should have been a successful candidate. However, riding the coattails of the famous Founder was simply not enough to carry Everett's obscure third party to victory. Instead, Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans won, bringing the sectionalism that had steadily grown over the nineteenth century to a breaking point.

Northern Unionists like Everett did much to connect Washington to their cause, but Southern politicians, especially Fire-Eaters, were not unwilling to surrender him completely. To lay their own claims to him, they touched on an aspect of Washington's life which few Northerners were willing to discuss – his status as a slave owner. Writing in an era in which slavery was still viewed as a "necessary evil" rather than a "positive good," Weems spun Washington's slave ownership in a positive direction, saying that "like a pure republican," he had ordered the manumission of his slaves after his wife's death, "lamenting, that from obstacles insurmountable, he could not do it earlier."²⁶ However, as the century wore on, slavery became an increasingly uncomfortable subject for many Unionists – so much so that Everett did not mention it anywhere in his *Oration on the Character of Washington*.²⁷ Yet it was a topic which had to come to the forefront eventually, and Southern advocates of slavery the ones who brought the most attention to it.

Southerners not only advertised Washington's connection to slavery but celebrated it. Advocates of a paternalistic attitude toward slavery like the *Memphis Appeal* and George Tucker

²⁵ Mason, "Sacred Ashes", 271

²⁶ Weems, *Life of Washington*, 181

²⁷ Everett, *Oration on the Character of Washington*

of the University of Virginia praised the way in which Washington had treated his slaves to show that it was not necessarily an evil institution.²⁸ Others took a much more extreme view. Louisa S. McCord described Washington as “a great and good man, a true patriot, a pure man, and withal, a *slaveholder*.” The fiery *Charleston Mercury* accused Virginia disgracing Washington through its lack of support for slaveholders’ rights.²⁹ This trend continued even into the contentious presidential election of 1860. In June of that year, a Missouri delegate to the Democratic Party’s convention in Baltimore cheered the fact that his ancestors lay “beneath the turf that shelters the bones of Washington, and I thank God that they rest in the graves of honest slaveholders.” His comment was greeted with applause from the other delegates.³⁰ While Unionists had a singular focus on Washington’s role in promoting national unity, Southerners emphasized Washington’s connections to slavery to the point that they portrayed themselves as his true heirs. While in the U.S. Senate, Jefferson Davis criticized a Massachusetts senator for claiming that the “slave power” had “banished such men as Washington and Jefferson.” Shifting the blame around, Davis insisted that the senator’s claim was “a part of the general theory that Washington and Jefferson, and the framers of the Constitution of the United States were Abolitionists!... Yet he knows that Washington and Jefferson owned slaves to the time of their death.”³¹ Departing significantly from Weems’s positive portrayal of Washington as the reluctant slave owner, Davis claimed Washington for the South by championing his connection with their “peculiar institution.” This set up an awkward situation in which two halves of the country claimed Washington for themselves, but for very different purposes.

²⁸ Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 76-77

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 80

³⁰ Hesselstine, *Three Against Lincoln*, 239

³¹ Dunbar Rowland, ed. *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist, Vol. IV*, (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 170

The conflicting images of George Washington endured through the Civil War, but that did not mean that they went unchallenged. During their famous debates for the U.S. Senate Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, candidates for the U.S. Senate from Illinois, made liberal use of Washington's name and character to persuade their listeners that their cause was following in his footsteps. While Lincoln had previously used Washington to advocate Union, just as Everett and others had, in his debates against Douglas he also began to use him to craft an antislavery argument. During the August 21, 1858 debate, Douglas asked Lincoln and the audience a poignant question which summarized the proslavery position regarding Washington: "Why can it [the United States] not exist divided into free and slaves States? Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, Hamilton, Jay, and the great men of that day, made this Government divided into free States and slave States, and left each State perfectly free to do as it pleased on the subject of slavery." He added to this that the framers of the Constitution had known that different laws had to exist for different parts of the country because it was so varied in climate and industry.³² Lincoln countered this by reminding Douglas and the audience that the founders believed in keeping the slavery "south of a certain line." Legislation like the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he contended, went against the "original principles" of the founders, particularly Jefferson, Washington, and Madison. Therefore by trying to contain it, he and his party were actually fighting slavery "in the Jeffersonian, Washingtonian, and Madisonian fashion." This last remark elicited laughter and applause.³³ The scene was repeated throughout the state of Illinois, and while Lincoln did not win the election, he articulated a cogent argument for how the Republican Party lived up to Washington's principles.

³² Basler, Roy P., ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. III* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 9

³³ Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. III*, 19

Even after losing to Douglas, Lincoln did not abandon his use of Washington to attack slavery. Speaking at the Cooper Institute in New York City on February 27, 1860, Lincoln tied George Washington to Congress's prohibition of slavery in federal territory in the Northwest Ordinance of 1789, which was passed during Washington's first term as President of the United States.³⁴ In doing this, he tried to link a particular course of action, halting the spread of slavery, with a specific action in Washington's administration. This contrasted the rhetoric of Lincoln's political opponents, whom he claimed made "invocations to Washington, imploring men to unsay what Washington said, and undo what Washington did."³⁵ With a few notable exceptions, most politicians in Lincoln's time only vaguely alluded to Washington's words and actions, seldom supporting them with quotes. Those who did used the Farewell Address and little else. In referencing the Northwest Ordinance, Lincoln used a specific act to support his view, giving him much more stable political ground to stand on.

By 1860, the conflict between Unionists and secessionists had acquired increased gravity. Following Lincoln's election, Southern states fearing a total ban of slavery called for conventions to consider seceding from the Union. In these conventions, as delegates tried to convince their peers to leave or remain in the Union, Washington became a familiar rhetorical device. An excellent example of this is Benjamin Hill's speech in the Georgia secession convention. Seeking to persuade his fellow delegates to act calmly and rationally, Hill created a parable which contrasted Washington's calmness in the French and Indian War with the rashness of General Braddock, his commander. Overconfident in his abilities, Braddock led his column into an ambush as they marched toward Fort Duquesne. With Braddock mortally wounded, the

³⁴ Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. III, 527

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 550

cool-headed Washington took over his command and led the surviving soldiers to safety. Hill concluded this lengthy example with one final appeal to rational behavior.

Who does not know the history of Washington; yet who can tell it?... The last hour of constitutional liberty, perpetuated to the glory of the end, or cut short in the frenzy of anarchy, shall wind up the history of Washington. Behold here the sudden destruction of the rash man and his followers, and the still unfolding success of the cool and thoughtful man, and then let us go to work to meet this crisis that is upon us.”³⁶

While Hill clearly invented much of the melodramatic dialogue that he attributed to the twenty-three-year-old Washington, his appeal for caution was quite genuine. If Georgia or any southern state seceded, its citizens might find themselves amid an even rasher and certainly more violent battle than the one that Braddock stumbled into.

Unfortunately for Hill, his words fell on deaf ears. Advocates of secession were thoroughly convinced that they, not the Unionists, were the ones who were following in Washington’s footsteps. On January 10, 1861, Jefferson Davis delivered a special message on affairs in South Carolina in which he attempted to disprove the argument that certain Southern patriots would have opposed secession.

Washington and Jackson, too, are often presented as authority against it – Washington, who led the army of the Revolution; Washington, whose reputation rests upon the fact that with the sword he cut the cord which bound the Colonies to Great Britain, they not having the justification of the sovereign attributes belonging to States; Washington, who presided when the States seceded from the Confederation, and formed the Union, in disregard of the claims of the States not agreeing to it... Bad authorities are these for our opponents; yet they are names under the shadow of which we can safely repose!³⁷

³⁶ William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia’s Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 88-90

³⁷ Dunbar Rowland, ed. *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist, Vol. V*, (Jackson, MS: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 22

Davis and his Southern compatriots believed that they were Revolutionaries rebelling against a tyrannical power that sought to restrict their liberties. In this way, they were repeating Washington's glorious example. If they had to engage in armed resistance in order to succeed in their Revolution, then they would only further prove themselves to be the Founder's true heirs.

The secession of the Southern states eventually resulted in war, and with the commencement of hostilities, many Americans looked to George Washington to understand the role that they would play in this conflict. More than a mere rhetorical tool, Washington was a powerful symbol to American citizens in both the North and the South. Before becoming the first president, Washington had been a soldier, and both before and during the war, Americans tended to elevate those who fought in the Revolution above those patriots who had not. This was literally true in the case of the 1858 equestrian statue of Washington in Richmond, Virginia. While other founders like Patrick Henry stood on foot, Washington towered over them on horseback, ready to lead America into battle.³⁸ This particular image became one which the Confederacy used as a national rallying point early in the war. Besides being the site of Jefferson Davis's formal inauguration, the equestrian statue also served as the basis for the new seal of the Confederacy. This seal depicted the silhouette of Washington on horseback with the words *Deo Vindice* – God will conquer – under him.³⁹ Beginning in March, 1861, it was printed on several different forms of Confederate paper currency, allowing it to become a recognizable material symbol throughout the South.⁴⁰

³⁸ Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery*, 72-74

³⁹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 24-25; Binnington, 142

⁴⁰ Ian Binnington, *Confederate Visions: Nationalism, Symbolism, and the Imagined South in the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 79, 90

Even without the seal, Confederates naturally looked to Washington as an ideal representation of their struggle. Evidence that they believed they were engaged in a second American Revolution pervades the writings of Southern soldiers. Major Thomas Rowland complained while in camp near Richmond in the summer of 1861, “it would never do to grow to be an old man and not be able to tell my grandchildren that I had fought in the second War for American Independence. The 17th of April and the 21st of July, 1861 are days long to be remembered in the annals of the Confederate States of America.”⁴¹ Likewise, Edmund DeWitt Patterson, a Northerner who had gone South to fight in the Confederacy, wrote on the Fourth of July, 1863: “Today the South contends for the same principles which fired the hearts of our ancestors in the revolutionary struggle, and as sure as right and justice prevail, so surely will we finally triumph.”⁴² Many Southerners took pride in this view especially since the North tried to dispute it. While some pejoratively termed all Confederates “rebels” rather than revolutionaries, Ann E. Hope of Hampton, Virginia, wrote in early 1863: “I am certainly a Rebel, Rebel is the righteous name that Washington bore and why should not we have the same.”⁴³ Throughout the South, soldiers and civilians used Washington in a radically different way than most antebellum politicians. Casting aside the message of the Farewell Address and the views of orators like Everett, Southerners believed that the true legacy of Washington was not to preserve a Union that had become oppressive to individual rights but rather to initiate a Revolution that would result in a return of their freedom.

⁴¹ “Letters of Major Thomas Rowland, C.S.A., From the Camps at Ashland And Richmond, Virginia, 1861. *William and Mary College Quarterly*, Vol. XXIV (January, 1916), No. 3, 234

⁴² John G. Barrett, ed., *Yankee Rebel: The Civil War Journal of Edmund DeWitt Patterson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 119

⁴³ Gallagher, *The Confederate War*, 79

As Southerners were revising their views on Washington, Northerners continued to use the Founder as an inspiration to promote the preservation of the Union. For quite a few soldiers, passing by places associated with Washington's life restored their conviction that their cause was right. On April 15, 1861, the *Daily National Intelligencer* of Washington, DC printed a letter from a sailor aboard the *Pawnee*, a ship in the U.S. Navy, in which the writer described sailing past Mount Vernon and engaging in an elaborate ship-wide salute to Washington's memory. Concluding this description, he wrote:

Pass by this grave, oh Americans, as did the Pawnee and her gallant crew, and if after you have the hearts to rend each other, to scatter ashes and ruin over the land of Washington, then, indeed, is vain all virtue and patriotism, and the sooner the iron heel of despotism is planted firmly upon the neck of the people the better. Let both North and South remember the cry, "Those that rule by the sword shall perish by the sword."⁴⁴

The sailor followed this by swearing that he and his shipmates would continue to perform their duty at all costs, encouraging his readers to follow in their example. Four years later, a Pennsylvania soldier named George W. Clymans took a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon and described his sense of sacred awe upon entering the room where Washington died. "Uncovering our heads as we enter, we feel awed into silence, for we believe the place where we are standing to be holy."⁴⁵ Even while on campaign, soldiers made note of the connections that they felt when passing places associated with Washington. In a letter to his brother, a Union soldier named William Allcot rejoiced, "I have passed over the ground where the emortal [sic] Washington fought the Battle of Yorktown."⁴⁶ The grammatical errors and misspelled words in Allcot's letters suggest he had a limited education, but he had learned enough to appreciate that by

⁴⁴ Lee, Jean B., ed. *Experiencing Mount Vernon: Eyewitness Accounts, 1784-1865* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2006), 207

⁴⁵ Lee, *Experiencing Mount Vernon*, 222

⁴⁶ William Allcot Papers 86 A1 1 Folder 1 Acc. No. 1986-48, 15 April 1862, Swem Library Special Collections Williamsburg, Virginia

fighting on the same ground as Washington, he was helping to preserve the Union Washington created.

Even Union soldiers who had not been born in the United States connected their experiences back to Washington. In a fragmented letter to his wife that is likely from February 1863, Peter Welsh, an immigrant of Irish descent, linked his homeland's enemy, England, to the beginning of the Civil War.

George Washington warned his country men to beware of foreign influence they have been warned many times since to beware and especialy of the hipocritical intrieuging of that accursed harlot of nations England but the warnings were only laughed at It was England that the agitation of the slavery question was first commenced and thousands of pounds contributed to keep it up.⁴⁷

Welsh's insistence that England was responsible for his adopted homeland's troubles was dubious and certainly influenced by his love of Ireland and hatred of England. Nevertheless, his mentioning of Washington as the sage advisor who had warned to beware of England demonstrates that while he had not been born in the United States, he still claimed Washington as his patriotic ancestor. A little later in the letter, he even made an argument similar to Everett's that the United States had to endure in order to serve as a beacon of hope for the nations of Europe, "particularly for poor old Erin."⁴⁸ Given his connections to Ireland and America, Welsh's letter showed that Washington was a symbol of liberty whom American citizens of all backgrounds could claim.

Material depictions of Washington in the North and South also connected the Founder to the causes of the two belligerents. Elizabeth Blair Lee of Washington, DC wrote that she

⁴⁷ Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cossé Richard, eds., *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh, Color Sergeant 28th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 62

⁴⁸ Kohl and Richard, *Irish Green and Union Blue*, 63

purchased a copy of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Washington and planned to put his antislavery sentiments on the back of the picture "for us to set up for our boy's study & example."⁴⁹ She had evidently embraced Lincoln's connection of Washington to not only Union but also the restriction and perhaps abolition of slavery. This was one use of Washington's physical likeness as a political symbol, but it was by no means the only one. As shown earlier through the Great Seal of the Confederacy, Southerners continued to use Washington's image for their own purposes. Ann C.R. Jones of Winchester wrote a letter on paper that had been captured from Union troops. While she cut out what she considered "objectionable words" – possibly ones championing the Union – she left Washington's image in the upper left corner, saying that his face "must always be a passport" to ensure her letter arrived.⁵⁰ As the war caused soldiers and civilians to interact with one another, the dueling views of Washington's legacy and the war occasionally butted heads. On an unspecified day in June 1864, James Henry Avery of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade led a detachment to search a woman's house for arms.

In a large upper room I found not only comfort, but splendor, and hanging on the wall was a life size portrait of General George Washington. I made the remark to the lady that it was a wonder that that picture did not take life and curse them for trying to break up the Union. Feeling at the same time that the picture itself was almost a certain guard against vandalism, I wondered, if the house had been searched by some roughs, if they could have proceeded after seeing that noble picture.⁵¹

Avery evidently disagreed with the woman's unspoken belief that Washington would have supported secession, but he also recognized that the general was a universal symbol for all Americans, one which he felt commanded respect from all who saw it.

⁴⁹ Virginia Jeans Laas, ed., *Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 344

⁵⁰ Margaretta Barton Colt, *Defend the Valley: A Shenandoah Family in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 194

⁵¹ James Henry Avery, *Under Custer's Command: the Civil War Journal of James Henry Avery*, edited by Eric J. Wittenberg (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2000), 87

The most direct connections that Americans made to their current situation was by comparing their leaders to their beloved Founder. The man who experienced the most comparisons was Abraham Lincoln. Even before he had taken the oath of office, Lincoln himself drew connections back to the first President. In his own Farewell Address at Springfield on February 11, 1861, he told a crowd, “I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.”⁵² James McPherson notes that Lincoln, like Everett and others, believed that the Union was the heir of the Revolutionary War and therefore was preserving the experiment of democratic government. “If secession were allowed to succeed,” he notes, “it would destroy that experiment.”⁵³ For that reason, Lincoln consciously alluded back to Washington and the Revolution to encourage his fellow citizens to fight for democratic principles as their forebears had.

On several occasions, Lincoln used Washington’s actions to justify his own, especially when the public appeared unsupportive. In the spring of 1861, Lincoln looked back to the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, which Washington suppressed with military force, to support his own raising of 75,000 troops to secure the return of federal installations.⁵⁴ However, this only aggravated the situation in the upper South, resulting in more decisions to secede. Writing after the war, the former Confederate John Mosby wrote: “In issuing his proclamation, Lincoln referred for authority to a statute in pursuance of which George Washington sent an army into Pennsylvania to suppress the Whiskey

⁵² Basler, Roy P., ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. IV* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 191

⁵³ James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford, 1990), 29

⁵⁴ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11

Insurrection. But the people were persuaded that Lincoln's real object was to abolish slavery."⁵⁵ Ironically, some of Lincoln's political opponents chose to criticize Lincoln by contrasting his actions with those of the ideal president, George Washington. Governor Seymour of New York attacked Lincoln's suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in this way. "War does not suspend the rights of men; and he who dares to say that Abraham Lincoln, at the head of his enormous armies, may rightfully do what George Washington would not do in the darkest hour of the revolution does not know what constitutional liberty is."⁵⁶ Both of these instances showed that inviting comparison to Washington could also result in fierce criticism.

Despite this, as the war progressed, many in the North came to believe that Lincoln was in many ways Washington's logical successor. As preserver of the Union, he occupied no less of a position than George Washington. In 1864, Henry Clay Work demonstrated this in a song called "Washington and Lincoln." Predicting that posterity would honor Lincoln and Washington together, he asked in his chorus, "Who gave us independence, on Continent and sea? / Who saved the glorious Union! And set a people free! This is the story Oh happy are we/ The story of Washington and Lincoln." Significantly, this song was written while Lincoln was still alive and was taught to Northern schoolchildren.⁵⁷ After his assassination, Lincoln immediately underwent his own apotheosis, rising up alongside Washington in America's patriotic pantheon. As his body lay in state, every statue in the Capitol rotunda was shrouded in black cloth except for that of George Washington. This symbolically demonstrated the kinship between the founder and

⁵⁵ Charles Wells Russel, ed., *Memoirs of Colonel John S. Mosby* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1917), 19

⁵⁶ Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 206

⁵⁷ H. Wiley Hitchcock, ed. *Songs of Henry Clay Work* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 83-86; Christian McWhirter, *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 102-103

defender of the Union.⁵⁸ In a medallion produced in 1870, Lincoln, Washington, and Ulysses S. Grant were all depicted together and described as “Defender, Martyr, Father.” No longer did Washington occupy the preeminent position among American patriots. The men who had preserved his work had also climbed to this height.

As the 1870 medallion illustrated, Lincoln was not the only Union hero who was lifted up to the same plane as Washington. From 1864 onward, the North also gave this honor to General Ulysses S. Grant. General Grant was the first officer in the United States Army to hold the rank of lieutenant general since George Washington.⁵⁹ While the Confederacy had awarded this rank to several individuals, the Union had not since they believed only the first commander-in-chief deserved that honor. Having obtained this rank and ensured the survival of the Union that Washington forged, Grant was an obvious choice for the honor of Washington’s successor. Even as far back as March 10, 1864, General William Tecumseh Sherman brought this to Grant’s attention. In a letter to the newly-minted lieutenant general, Sherman told Grant that he was “now Washington’s legitimate successor.” He had risen to great heights, but with this promotion Grant also came to “occupy a position of almost dangerous elevation.” In order to avoid a potentially fatal fall from grace, Grant needed to emulate Washington’s character, remaining “simple, honest, and unpretending.” If he did so, he would gain “the respect and love of friends, and the homage of millions of human beings that will award to you a large share in securing to them and their descendants a Government of Law and Stability.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 196, 198

⁵⁹ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 718

⁶⁰ *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Volume 10: January 1-May 31, 1864*, Edited by John Y. Simon (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 188n

Following Lee's surrender at Appomattox, General Grant's reputation reached new heights and obtained further comparisons to that of Washington. In 1865, William Pearson wrote the general to say: "I hope and trust it will be said of you, as of the immortal Washington – 'the first in war, the first in peace, and the first in the hearts of his countrymen!'"⁶¹ Taking the comparison furthest of all, the New York *Herald* speculated that the savior of the Union would follow in Washington's footsteps and run for President. If he did, the *Herald* anticipated "his election to be unanimous as that of George Washington and as beneficial to the welfare of the republic."⁶² The *Herald's* expectations would eventually be dashed as Grant's later presidency was riddled with scandal and corruption. Nevertheless, these statements demonstrate a widespread desire to give Washington's laurels to modern American figures, showing once more a belief that the Civil War had achieved something every bit as important as the War for American Independence.

Even in the defeated South, the president and highest ranking were routinely compared to George Washington. A popular ballad and the time referred to Jefferson Davis as "our second Washington."⁶³ Confederate veteran Sam Watkins went still further, saying in his memoir "*Company Aytch*". "There never lived on this earth, from the days of Hampden to George Washington, a purer patriot or a nobler man than Jefferson Davis; and, like Marius, grand even in ruins."⁶⁴ To Watkins, Davis was a tragic figure who might have become the second

⁶¹ *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant. Volume 15: May 1 – December 31, 1865*, Edited by John Y. Simon (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 519

⁶² Gary Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 136

⁶³ Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 14

⁶⁴ Sam Watkins, "*Company Aytch*," or, *A Side Show of the Big Show and Other Sketches*, ed., M. Thomas Inge (Harmondsworth, England: Plume, 1999), 210

Washington had he succeeded in his revolution. Because he did not but still remained grand, Watkins placed him above Washington in his scale of nobility.

While Watkins praised Davis, the majority of southerners gave the honor of second Washington to their battlefield commander, Robert E. Lee. In the historian Gary Gallagher's view, Lee and his army occupied the same symbolic status as Washington and his Continental Army, serving as rallying points for the fledgling Confederate nation.⁶⁵ It was logical that in a war which they deemed a second War of Independence the Confederates idolized the general whom they believed would lead them to battlefield victory. Yet as Gallagher notes elsewhere, Lee did not fight his war in quite the same fashion as Washington. He was a much more aggressive leader than Washington, taking a more offensive-oriented view of strategy. Still, he fought in a fashion which pleased the Confederate citizenry.⁶⁶ Less than a decade after the war, former Confederates recognized that when one looked at the details of their experiences, Lee and Washington were not very similar on the battlefield. In an address at Washington and Lee University on January 19, 1872, former Lieutenant General Jubal Early made an extensive comparison between the two, saying that "in their great self-command, in their patriotism, and in their purity and unselfishness of character, there was a great similarity." Yet while Washington had received material aid from European allies and benefitted from the difficulty of the North American countryside, Lee had received no assistance from Europe and waged a war on a larger scale. America's geography and technology had changed so much, he argued, that "there cease to be any further points of comparison between them as soldiers."⁶⁷ Through these subtle comparisons, Early demonstrated a belief that Lee and Washington had very different battlefield

⁶⁵ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 59

⁶⁶ Gary Gallagher, *Lee: The Soldier*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 284

⁶⁷ Gallagher, *Lee: The Soldier*, 70

experiences. Yet perhaps because he had so much against him, as later Lost Cause theorists would agree, Early believed Lee was worthy of the same sort of respect that Washington received.

No matter whether they compared Washington to Confederate or Union leaders, all citizens who once again invoked his name testified to his power and diversity as a symbol. The specifics of his life were occasionally referenced, as when Lincoln attempted to legitimize his party's position or justify his invasion of the Confederacy, but in general it was the vagueness with which Washington was used symbolically which allowed so many different groups to claim him. Northerners championed his sentiments on Union as stated in the Farewell Address and occasionally even used him to oppose the spread of slavery. Southerners on the other hand alternated between casting him as an ardent practitioner of slavery or as an inspiration for their second revolution. These varied views occasionally produced disagreements, as the Lincoln-Douglas debates demonstrate, but Americans never managed to reach a settlement on what Washington actually meant as a patriotic symbol. Nevertheless, the many representations and invocations of Washington in the Civil War era demonstrate that the mythical version of this founder touched all aspects of life. The mythical Washington may not have been based in fact, but that did not matter to most Americans at that time. With so much political uncertainty, American citizens turned to him for guidance, hoping to find that something in his exemplary life would reveal the correct course of action. Even though there was no set interpretation of Washington as a symbol, no one can doubt his prominence in life during the Civil War, meaning that understanding him in this context is essential for understanding how politicians, soldiers, and civilians interpreted their role in the most divisive war in American history.

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The Baptists, Culture, and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Virginia

On February 20, 1772, the first page of Alexander Purdie and John Dixon's *Virginia Gazette* printed a scathing, full-page open letter entitled "An Address to the Anabaptists imprisoned in Caroline County, August 8, 1771." Referring to the jailed dissenters by the same name as a radical sect of German Protestants which led a bloody revolt in the seventeenth century, the anonymous author claimed he wanted to show modern Baptists "the Reason and Legality of the Proceedings against you." Contrasting their excessive zeal with the religious sobriety of the Anglicans, the writer proclaimed that "while you, magnifying yourselves into Prophets, and Apostles, threaten us with the Fate of a Pharaoh, Zedekiah, Darius, and Herod, we feel no Resentment but that of Pity and Compassion for your Mistakes and Sufferings." Nevertheless, the Baptists had to understand that obeying the law and respecting the union of church and state were, in the author's mind, essential to the preservation of society. "To these religious Establishments it becomes the Duty of every good Member of Society to submit; and an Opposition to them must be considered as Heresy and Schism, and a Breach of the Laws." The Baptists refused to submit to these on the grounds that they had a "Call from God to preach," but as far as the author was concerned, they could produce no evidence of their "call" which could serve as evidence in a court. Instead they had revealed themselves to be disrupters of social bonds. "Wives are drawn from their Husbands, Children from their Parents, and Slaves from the Obedience of their Masters. Thus the very Heartstrings of those little Societies which form the greater are torn in sunder, and all their Peace destroyed." In short, according to this

unnamed Anglican, the Baptists were radicals and iconoclasts who threatened to undo everything that the church and state sought to preserve.⁶⁸

Exactly who wrote produced this philippic against the Baptists is unknown, but according to the historian of religion and law in Virginia, Thomas E. Buckley, it was likely Edmund Pendleton, a justice and vestryman from Caroline County, where the Baptists were imprisoned. As a justice, he would have been responsible for the legal proceedings which held the Baptists in jail. Therefore in Buckley's view, Pendleton "was simply justifying his treatment of the Baptists who had come before his court." However, Pendleton was also the leader of the House of Burgesses, and for this reason his article holds another significance. The address was printed in February 1772, at the same time that the House of Burgesses was debating an Act of Toleration which would have ensured that all Virginians "dissenting from the Church of *England*... shall have and enjoy the full and free Exercise of their Religion, without Molestation or Danger of incurring any Penalty whatsoever." Another dissenting group, the Presbyterians had pushed for this sort of equality several years earlier, but no action took place until the Baptists appeared on the scene.⁶⁹ Beginning in 1770, they repeatedly petitioned the legislature to redress legal injustices they had suffered at the hands of the state and established church. Because of their perceived status as societal disrupters, the Baptists had been imprisoned in many of the places where they tried to preach. Initially, these petitions sought to ease the legal restrictions on Baptists and other dissenters, but as they came to view the Anglican establishment as more and more antithetical to the principles of liberty, they began to push for a more radical change – the

⁶⁸ "Address to the Anabaptists" Purdie and Dixon, *Virginia Gazette*, Feb. 20, 1772

⁶⁹ Thomas E. Buckley, *Establishing Religious freedom: Jefferson's Statute in Virginia*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 43-44, 46

total disestablishment of the Church of England and the implementation of complete religious liberty.⁷⁰

Since Virginia's founding, the Church of England had been the colony's only official religious institution. There it enjoyed more control over government and civil society than in most of the other mainland British colonies. As the example of Edmund Pendleton shows, there was substantial overlap between the church and state. Prominent Anglicans served on both their church vestries and in the courts and legislature. Public taxes supported the Anglican clergy, churches, and glebes. Regular attendance at Anglican churches was mandatory, and its ministers were the only ones who could perform legal marriage ceremonies. As John Ragosta observes, "To any eighteenth-century Virginian, the legal and social dominance of the Church of England was unmistakable."⁷¹

While its dominance may have been immediately recognizable, it was by no means absolute. Several groups of dissenters challenged the Church of England's authority throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and each time the Church used its connections to the state in an attempt to maintain its power. In response to the Quaker challenge of the seventeenth century, Virginia's legislature passed a series of laws which ordained that all individuals must be baptized into the church or face possible deportation for dissent. Draconian measures like these were no longer possible after the Act of Toleration in 1689, but the church and state continued to restrict the freedoms of dissenters whenever they stepped out of line. Many dissenters, notably the Presbyterians, cooperated with authorities so they could continue practicing their religion.

⁷⁰ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 184-185

⁷¹ John A. Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4

They paid for their licenses as dissenting ministers and explained their views when questioned. The Baptists, however, would not cooperate. Claiming that only God's authority was absolute, they resisted earthly authority whenever they felt it infringed on their religious freedom. Acts of protest including preaching without licenses and refusing to have their children baptized. Perhaps worst of all, the Baptists ministered indiscriminately to men and women no matter whether they were free or enslaved. As the "Address to the Anabaptists" demonstrates, elite members of the Church of England had cause to be uneasy.

The Baptists' defiance of social restrictions in the face of imprisonment and persecutions helped to make it grow. Men and women were inspired by their emotional messages which resonated with them more deeply than the staid, rehearsed sermons and prayers of most Anglican clergymen. In the course of less than thirty years, the Baptists went from being a dissenting group that was low in numbers to one of the major religious groups in Virginia, eventually surpassing the Anglicans. Their rise was meteoric, testifying to the effectiveness of their message. As they went on the ascendant, they began to transform society. The Baptists avidly campaigned for changes to Virginia's religious laws, demanding not just toleration of their dissenting beliefs but full religious liberty. They were by no means alone in desiring these changes – Presbyterians, Lutherans, and even secular rationalists also did much to bring about this end. But what makes Baptists remarkable is that they were not already well-represented in the colony's legislature. Their attempts to convert Virginians coincided with their attempts to influence the government. They transformed society even as they sought to transform the lives of individuals.

Virginia's dissenting religious groups, especially the Baptists, and their contributions to the creation of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, have long been favorite subjects of

study for historians. Beginning with the first histories of Baptists published at the start of the nineteenth century and extending to the present, a rich historiography has emerged around the Virginia Baptists. The earliest studies of this group, such as Robert B. Semple's 1810 history, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, emphasized the Baptists' separation from society and how they were persecuted for their ideas.⁷² While prone to exaggeration, this attitude is understandable given that the Baptists, like most American citizens at that time, were still rejoicing in their perceived triumph over forces of oppression. Yet it is most problematic because it has continued to permeate modern scholarship of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Among the most pervasive views of Baptists around the time of the Revolution is the belief that they were on the fringes of Virginian society. In *The Transformation of Virginia*, Rhys Isaac said that "The following of the early Virginia Separate Baptist movement was accurately reputed to be composed of the poor unlearned. Only isolated converts were made among the gentry, but many among the slaves."⁷³ It is true that the Baptists specifically ministered to the lower classes enslaved Africans, winning many converts in the process, but this aspect of their identity has long been overemphasized in order to set them apart from society. Recently, Jewel L. Spangler has argued that the Baptists were not quite the outsiders they have commonly been depicted as. Members of Baptist churches belonged to many different classes of society, ranging from affluent white slaveholders to enslaved African Americans. Even as some were being imprisoned for defying religious laws, others became the enforcers of the law, serving as jury members and sheriffs. "Not many true outsiders to the community would have been called to

⁷² Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond: Pitt & Dickinson, 1894).

⁷³ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 166

serve in this capacity.”⁷⁴ In fact, the itinerant Baptist preacher Henry Toler owed his life to the two Baptist magistrates who stopped several men from attacking him as he was crossing a ferry.⁷⁵ These examples show that far from being disconnected members of the lower class, Baptists could occupy very influential and elite positions.

Building on the belief that the Baptists were outsiders, several scholars have argued that the Baptists were “separatists” who wanted to maintain a barrier with the rest of society. In his article on the relationship between Virginia Baptists and slavery, James David Essig invoked the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr to refer to Baptists as adherents of the “‘Christ against culture’ viewpoint.” That is, believing that the dominant culture was evil and antithetical to the spirit of evangelism, they wished to separate from the world. Essig argues that “Their rejection of the Anglican Church, their simple lifestyle, and their demand for religious freedom set the Baptists apart as a disaffected group in colonial Virginia.”⁷⁶ Patricia Bonomi voiced a similar position when describing how the Baptists dressed dissimilarly from most Virginians. “The Baptists themselves cared little how they appeared to men and women of fashion. Being almost complete outsiders, they had nothing to lose by confronting authority—a circumstance that seems to have infused them with a great deal of energy and perseverance.”⁷⁷ In both of these examples, there is an overarching assumption that the Baptists were always outsiders and always wanted to remain so.

⁷⁴ Jewel L. Spangler, *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 129

⁷⁵ Henry Toler Diary, August 18, 1786

⁷⁶ James David Essig, “A Very Wintry Season: Virginia Baptists and Slavery, 1785-1797”, *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (April, 1980), 171

⁷⁷ Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 184

This paper seeks to argue otherwise. While the Baptists certainly experienced persecution and differed in many ways from mainstream Anglicans, they did not always want to be members of a separate group that was cut off from the rest of society. Rather than simply retreating into small, closed-off communities like monastics, the Baptists routinely engaged with the culture around them. Returning to the ideas that H. Richard Niebuhr set forth, the Baptists did not embody the “Christ against culture” mindset, but instead adopted the view Niebuhr termed “Christ the Transformer of Culture.”⁷⁸ While they did not initially set out to “transform culture,” their desire to evangelize to everyone they could reach brought them into increased contact with the rest of Virginian society. And just as they sought to change the lives of individuals, they recognized that the wickedness of the colony’s culture needed to be changed as well. So they took on the vices they saw in everyday life – gambling, horseracing, dancing, and drinking – and pushed for greater equality among believers regardless of race or class.

Eventually, this mission to transform Virginia’s culture brought the Baptists into a fight for religious freedom. As dissenters, the Baptists technically enjoyed protection under the 1689 Act of Toleration and would have been able to continue holding meetings so long as their members attended an Anglican church once per month and their ministers had a valid license. But the Baptists would not settle for toleration if it meant compromising the rights that God had given them. Therefore they set out to change the law, pushing for reform in ministerial licensing, solemnization of marriages, and ultimately freedom of worship. Each of these efforts brought improvements for other dissenters, showing that far from being members of a sect that just wanted to be left alone, the Baptist actively worked to bring society closer to a holy ideal.

⁷⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row), 1951.

* * *

While Anglicanism had been the official religion of the colony from its beginning, that did not prevent dissent from taking root. The first challengers to the establishment were the Quakers, who possessed many of the same characteristics in worship and in relations to civil society that the Baptists later would as well. Their first missionary was a woman, Elizabeth Harris, who arrived in Virginia in 1655. Quickly realizing the threat her messages posed, the authorities asked her to leave, and she did so without further conflict. However, two years later, when two other missionaries arrived, they were immediately arrested and deported to Maryland. These strong reactions resulted not from a mere disagreement with the Quakers' message but more for their potential to be disrupters of society. At that time, Quakers had very emotional services, consisting of "ecstatic testimonies to the work of the Spirit." This contrasted the formality of Anglican services. On top of this, they flaunted social conventions by refusing to attend militia musters, swear oaths, remove hats in court, permit Anglican clergy to baptize their children, or be married in Anglican churches. In their churches, all were equal, even women and African Americans. Even if they did not actively work to undo peace in their communities, the establishment believed they had this potential and therefore worked to curtail their freedoms.⁷⁹

In 1660, the legislature imposed a formal limitation on the Quakers' freedoms through law. Hoping to suppress an "unreasonable and turbulent sort of people" who through "teaching and publishing, lies, miracles, false visions, prophecies and doctrines" were threatening "to destroy religion, lawes, communities and all bonds of civil societie." Anyone who housed a Quaker would pay a £100 fine, while the Quakers themselves would be imprisoned and then

⁷⁹ Buckley, *Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia*, 9.

deported.⁸⁰ At this stage, the legislators viewed any dissent as being capable of undoing the structure of society, thus it had to be totally removed. While it did reduce the Quakers' numbers for a long time, it failed to force all Virginians into compliance. Therefore in December 1662, the legislature elected to impose a fine of two thousand pounds of tobacco on the "many schismaticall persons [who] out of their averseness to the orthodox established religion, or out of the new fangled conceit of their owne heriticall inventions," refused to have their children baptized by Anglican ministers.⁸¹ Since it remained on the books into the next century, this law targeting Quakers would also cause problems for the Baptists, who only baptized adults. It would also result in later legal persecutions.

While the Virginia legislature was unwilling to tolerate dissenters, in 1689, the recently-crowned monarchs William and Mary created the Act of Toleration, which permitted dissenters to worship freely so long as they subscribed to certain requirements.⁸² All dissenters except those who denied the trinity were exempt from penal laws as long as they took the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, attended the meetinghouse of a registered congregation (whose doors always had to be open), and subscribed to the thirty nine articles of faith, "except those relating to church government and infant baptism." However, mayors and principal magistrates could not attend the meetings of dissenters in the formal trappings of their office "on pain of disability to hold that or any other office." The reason for this was that given their elevated position, it would be improper

⁸⁰ Hening, *Statutes*, I:532-533; Buckley, *Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia*, 9-10.

⁸¹ William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large, Vol. II*. (New York: R&W&G Bartow, 1823), 165-166

⁸² Charles Fenton James, *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971; originally published 1900)

for them to not support the national church.⁸³ Aside from that limitation, Protestant dissenters had all the same freedoms of other English subjects.

Of course, royal laws were not always obeyed in their original form when brought to Virginia. In 1699, provisions of the Toleration Act were incorporated into Virginia law. Dissenters would be permitted to attend meetinghouses of their choosing, but the law required that they return to the parish church at least once every two months or else they would be subject to “penalties and forfeitures.” In a later act passed in October 1705, the law was altered to punish anyone over twenty-one who did not attend their parish church at least *once* a month. As William Waller Hening noted, the Toleration Act as implemented in Virginia hardly demonstrated any tolerance at all.⁸⁴ As the 1772 debate over extending toleration demonstrated, realizing the full guarantees of the law would become a major goal for the Baptists once they arrived in Virginia.

The Great Awakening brought religious turmoil to Virginia, but it did not initially threaten the Anglicans’ long-enjoyed control of the colony. George Whitefield certainly shocked the establishment in 1746 by deviating from the Book of Common and preaching emotional sermons to his “New Light” followers, but since he remained a clergyman in the church of England, his ministry only prefigured the greater changes that would come with other dissenters.⁸⁵ A decade later in 1759, Samuel Davies brought “New Light” Presbyterianism to the colony. Davies’s efforts, along with the presence of Scots and Scots-Irish, quickly made the

⁸³ Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 53-54; For more information on the Articles of Faith, see Gilbert [Burnet], *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: William Tegg & Co 1850)

⁸⁴ Writing in 1823, decades after the Statute for Religious Freedom had passed, William Waller Hening said “It is surely an abuse of terms to call a law a *toleration-act*, which imposes a religious test, on the conscience, in order to avoid the penalties of another law, equally violating every principle of religious freedom.” This testifies to how much Virginians had come to view religious liberty as an inalienable right. Hening *Statutes*, Vol. 3, 171, 360-361

⁸⁵ Buckley, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia*, 9

Presbyterians a powerful religious force. But while they were dissenters, the Presbyterians tried to cooperate with the Anglicans whenever possible. They conformed to the laws, paid fines for non-attendance of parish churches, and gave explanations to the civil government for why they were dissenting. Importantly, they were very selective in choosing their ministers and tried to ensure that they were college educated. All of this has led Jewel Spangler to conclude that “In the end, Presbyterians mirrored the dominant culture far more than it challenged it. The faith became a supplement to Anglicanism, not a replacement for it.”⁸⁶

The Baptists, however, did present a serious challenge to the Anglican establishment, although it took some time for this to develop. In 1714, a minister named Robert Norden traveled to Virginia from England and formed a congregation of General Baptists, which believed in the Arminian doctrine of receiving God’s grace through free will. The sect flourished for a time, spreading from Prince George County into adjacent localities. But by 1762, the General Baptists had declined so much that they only had one functional congregation, in Princess Anne County. They posed no apparent threat to the Anglican establishment, and eventually combined with the Regular Baptists, who, along with the Separate Baptists, would eventually produce a serious challenge to Virginia’s religious status quo.⁸⁷

Even though both groups referred to themselves as “Baptists,” the Regulars and the Separates were different in origins, practices, and even doctrine. The Regular Baptists were Calvinists who came from Pennsylvania. In 1742, the Philadelphia Baptist Association to which these Baptists initially belonged adopted the London Confession of 1677, which included several

⁸⁶ Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 106; Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 67, 74-75

⁸⁷ Jewel L. Spangler, *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 80

sections that endorsed the doctrine of predestination.⁸⁸ The next year, in 1743, the Regular Baptists began sending ministers into Virginia, eventually gaining enough followers to separate from the Philadelphia Association and form the Kettocton Association, centered in Loudoun County. They gradually spread out from there into other counties in northern and western Virginia, reaching 624 members and ten churches across seven counties by 1770.⁸⁹ Part of their appeal was their ministers' "plain manner of preaching," which was easy for people to understand no matter what their level of education was. In fact, the early Baptist preacher William Fristoe reports that his brother, Daniel Fristoe only had a "tolerable English education," but became a preacher anyway because he felt a spiritual calling and gained the congregation's approval. The people he baptized might similarly lack "head knowledge" as his brother later put it, but so long as they demonstrated a change in heart, they would be welcomed into the church.⁹⁰

The Separate Baptists, however, came from New England and resembled George Whitefield's New Lights. They espoused Arminianism, the belief that people must accept God's grace through free will.⁹¹ Like the Methodists, they believed this decision was demonstrated dramatically through an ecstatic conversion, which produced strong physical effects on the body and left the soul forever changed. Such a conversion could involve crying out, falling down, or a host of other physical symptoms.⁹² They also eschewed all creeds and confessions, believing that only the Bible provided a sound foundation for faith. When the Separates' northward path crossed with the Regulars' southward path, they initially opposed one another. William Fristoe

⁸⁸ Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 3-4; Buckley, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia*, 13. See also *A Confession of Faith Put forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations Of Christians...* (London: Benjamin Harris, 1677), esp. 37-39.

⁸⁹ Gewehr, *The Great Awakening*, 107-108; William Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Kettocton Baptist Association*. Staunton, VA: William Gilman Lyford, 1808.

⁹⁰ Fristoe, *A Concise History...*, 9, 15, 27-28.

⁹¹ Buckley, *Establishing Religious Freedom*, 13-14

⁹² Gewehr *The Great Awakening*, 112; Fristoe, *A Concise History...*, 21; Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 193

later wrote that the Regulars were “jealous” of Separate Baptists, who believed that adopting a confession would “shackle them” and lead to “formality and deadness” – precisely the sort of thing they opposed in Anglicanism. The Regulars saw no problem with confessions, but did look down on the Separates’ ostentation in worship. According to the minister John Leland, the Regular Baptists were “solemn and rational” in worship and looked down on the while Separates’ histrionic, public displays of how the spirit was working within them.⁹³ David Thomas, a minister in the Ketocton Association of Regular Baptists, criticized these in a 1774 writing. “As these horrid vociferations and obstreperous commotions, mentioned in the objections, never were the effect of my preaching, nor are approved of by our churches as any part of religion, I am no ways obliged to vindicate any or all of them.”⁹⁴ Moreover, while some Regular Baptists were willing to register their meetinghouses and apply for licenses, the Separates resolutely refused to allow anyone to interfere in their God-given right to preach.⁹⁵ It took a great deal of dialogue before these two groups finally merged in 1787.

Despite their many differences, the Baptists were united in that the Anglicans considered both menaces to society. As “An Address to the Anabaptists” demonstrated, members of the larger society tended to refer to all Baptists through the epithet “Anabaptist,” a reference to the radical German sect which took part in the violent Münster uprising of 1534.⁹⁶ The term was used very frequently. The English traveler Nicholas Cresswell on Sunday, December 17, 1775 that he “Went to hear Bombast, Noise and Nonsense, uttered by a Methodist and an Anabaptist

⁹³ Leland, *Works*, 105

⁹⁴ Cited in Gewehr, *The Great Awakening*, 115

⁹⁵ Monica Najar, “Sectarians and Strategies of Dissent” in Paul Razor and Richard E. Bond, eds., *From Jamestown to Jefferson: The Evolution of Religious Freedom in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 127-28; Gewehr, *The Great Awakening*, 126

⁹⁶ Spangler, *Virginians Reborn*, 83; Essig, “A Very Wintry Season”, 171

preacher” in Loudoun County.⁹⁷ Similarly, a tidewater tutor named Philip Vickers Fithian recorded in his journal March 6, 1774 that “the Anabaptists in Loudon County are growing very numerous; & seem to be increasing in affluence.” His friend Mr. Lane blamed them for “quite destroying pleasure in the Country; for they encourage ardent Pray’r; strong & constant faith, & intire Banishment of *Gaming, Dancing, & Sabbath-Day Diversions.*” Fithian himself believed that they were “numerous in many County’s in this Province & are generally accounted troublesome.” He added that “Parson Gibbern has preached several Sermons in opposition to them, in which he has labour’d to convince his People that what they say are only whimsical Fancies or at most Religion grown to Wildness & Enthusiasm!”⁹⁸ The “Parson Gibbern” of Fithian’s journal was Reverend Isaac William Giberne of Lunenburg Parish, an Anglican preacher who had preached a sermon to a full congregation “exposing the dangerous Tenets of those Sectaries of Anabaptists, which are very pernicious to society, and subversive of almost every Christian and moral Duty.”⁹⁹ Each of these denunciations of the “Anabaptists” demonstrated that allies of the Anglican establishment believed they posed the greatest threat to their security of any of the dissenting religions.

To some non-Baptists, the most concerning component of these New Lights’ ministry was their insistence that African Americans were equal in the church to whites. They avidly sought converts among the enslaved, A runaway advertisement from the Virginia Gazette on July 21, 1772 described one escaped slave by saying “He is a Baptist, and I expect will show a little of it in Company.”¹⁰⁰ The Baptist preacher Henry Toler also recorded in his diary that when he

⁹⁷ *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774-1777*. New York: The Dial Press, 1924., 133

⁹⁸ Hunter D. Farish, ed., *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, 1943), 96-97; Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 101

⁹⁹ John K. Nelson A *Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776*. Chapel Hill, 2001), 177-178; Dixon and Purdie, *Virginia Gazette*, September 16, 1773.

¹⁰⁰ Dixon and Purdie, *The Virginia Gazette*, July 21, 1772

held a meeting in Hanover County on May 9, 1783, “The Number of Blacks by far exceeded that of the whites.” He also baptized an African American woman alongside a white woman on July 17, 1786.¹⁰¹ Such acts must have shocked many in Virginia society at that time, prompting the Reverend John Leland to provide an explanation for the Baptists’ ministering to slaves. “Liberty of conscience, in matters of religion, is the right of slaves, beyond contradiction; and yet, many masters and overseers will whip and torture the poor creatures for going to meeting, even at night, when the labor is over.” This practical explanation was not enough. The equality that the Baptists voiced was of great concern to slaveholders everywhere and brought them even greater animosity.¹⁰²

As the “Address to the Anabaptists” printed in the *Virginia Gazette* showed, numerous slaveholders became quite concerned by the extent to which Baptists sought converts among slaves. One of these was the affluent planter Landon Carter. On March 31, 1770, Carter noted how he had punished an enslaved carpenter named Tony for disorderly behavior. “I thought this a truly religious fellow – but have had occasion to think otherwise and that he is a hypocrite of the vilest kind. His just religion that broke out upon him was new light & I believe it is from some inculcated doctrine of those rascals that the slaves in this Colony are grown so much worse. It behooves every man therefore to take care of his own – at least I am determined to do what I can – Mine shall be brought to their piety – though with as little severity as possible.” Carter’s statements reveal how much he believed that Baptists were threatening the order of their plantation by producing insubordinate slaves. In 1776, his troubles with the only increased after one of his overseers, John Self, became a Baptist. Saying that he “cannot serve God and

¹⁰¹ *Henry Toler Diary*, May 9, 1783; July 17, 1786

¹⁰² John Leland, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland* (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845), 95

Mammon,” he informed Carter that he “would not continue in my business but to convert my people.” By “people” Self meant Carter’s slaves. With the Baptists’ emphasis on equality between blacks and whites, he had reason to believe that the Baptists would meddle in his affairs. In light of this news, Carter mused that it had been “a strange year about my overseers; some, horrid hellish rogues and others religious villains.” In his mind, a zealous Baptist overseer was every bit as much of a nuisance as an immoral one.

Whether due to their conversion of slaves, their excessive preaching style, or their perceived low social status, Anglicans roundly criticized the Baptists. To respond to all of these spirited attacks, Baptist ministers began to formulate their own explanations for their faith, hoping to convince others that they were sincerely carrying out God’s work. In 1774, the Fauquier County Baptist minister David Thomas produced a work entitled *The Virginian Baptist* in which he produced a cogent response to each of the Anglicans’ attacks on their faith and supposed disruptive nature. Responding to the claim that they were “a poor and illiterate sect” which should not be taken seriously, Thomas argued that the Bible clearly shows the humble are to be more revered than the rich. “The truth is, poverty, the want of erudition and the malice of an ungodly world, are just so many more likely characters of GOD’s election, than of the contrary.” Nevertheless, on the title page of the book, Thomas himself is said to hold an “A.M.”, demonstrating significant education at that time. Even if the Baptists wanted to embrace their lack of earthly knowledge, their leaders often possessed it all the same. He later demonstrated his conviction that human learning was valuable by stating that “Though we don’t approve of it as a mistress; yet we esteem it as a serviceable hand maid. It is one thing to respect literature in its proper place, and another to idolize it.” In this way, Baptists were not the ignorant radicals that

they were commonly believed to be. Many of their ministers, including Thomas believed in using the best parts of worldly life, such as education, in order to further spiritual ends.¹⁰³

These arguments did succeed with some wealthy Virginians, occasionally producing dramatic results. In 1776, Robert “Councillor” Carter, one of the wealthiest men in Virginia, emerged from a lengthy period of religious doubt brought on by the “spiritual impotence” of the established church and became a Baptist. Zealous in his faith, Carter proceeded to use his financial resources to help the Baptists, giving land to congregations and supporting the education of ministers like Henry Toler. For three years, Carter provided for Toler’s education at a religious academy in Philadelphia, showing that there was a desire among some Baptists to acquire serious Biblical knowledge rather than relying solely on emotions, as their contemporaries and even modern historians have charged. Carter continued to support Toler throughout his ministry, allowing him to hold meetings at Nomini Hall whenever his itinerant wanderings led him back to the Northern Neck.¹⁰⁴

In the opinion of Louis Morton, Robert Carter’s biographer, the Councillor’s conversion took place at a time when the Baptist movement was “still confined generally to the lower and socially inferior classes.” It was not until the last decade of the eighteenth century that it became a faith which any Virginian could embrace. While Carter may have been exceptional among converts for his extreme wealth, that did not mean that all Baptists were poor and without influence. Anglican minister Devereux Jarratt complained that while only a few joined the Baptists when they began to minister in his parish, one “man of consequence,” William Harper,

¹⁰³ David Thomas, *The Virginian Baptist or a View and Defence of the Christian Religion as It Is Professed by Baptists of Virginia...* (Baltimore, 1774), 41-42, 55

¹⁰⁴ Louis Morton, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall: A Virginia Tobacco Planter of the Eighteenth Century* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated, 1941), 234-239

did convert. His baptism in 1770 “proved very detrimental to the interests of *religion* [i.e. Anglicanism] in that corner of the parish, where it had flourished for some years before this event.” Jarratt linked the discomfiting rise of the Baptists in that small area with Jarratt’s conversion, suggesting that Harper must have wielded some social influence as a “man of consequence.” Since Jarratt further laments that Anglicanism “began to decline” following Harper’s conversion, he shows that social leaders could bring many over to the side of the Baptists.¹⁰⁵

However, many elites continued to oppose the Baptists and came to resent their “disruptive” nature so much that they used their noncompliance with the portion of the Toleration Act requiring ministerial licenses as a pretense to arrest them. Between 1768 and 1778, Culpeper County had thirteen arrests, while Caroline County had an incredible twenty-three. According to John Ragosta, “By the end of 1774, more than fifty Baptist ministers – over half of those in Virginia – and a handful of others had been jailed for preaching. The arrests continued up to the outbreak of the war, with 1774 seeing the second highest rate of incarceration in the seven-year period. Every dissenter in Virginia must have known or known of several ministers who had been jailed.”¹⁰⁶ The first major arrest of Baptist ministers came in 1768 when John Waller, Lewis Craig, and others were arrested for preaching in Spotsylvania County. The magistrates informed them that they could go if they promised not to preach anymore, but they refused and went to the jail singing. After four weeks, Lewis Craig was released and immediately began working to ensure that his companions and all other Baptists would not be troubled by the law any further. Testifying to the Baptists’ desire to work with

¹⁰⁵ Devereux Jarratt. *The Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt: An Autobiography* (First Published 1806, Baltimore by Warner and Hanna. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 60-61

¹⁰⁶ Ragosta, *Wellspring of Liberty*, 5, 25

society to bring about change, Craig immediately sent a letter to Deputy Governor John Blair, who forced the local king's attorney to release the others so that they could apply for licenses.¹⁰⁷ This tactic of working with the government to secure religious liberty would be used over and over as Baptists were imprisoned in other parts of the state. Following his imprisonment, the Reverend James Ireland appealed to Governor Botetourt for a license. While the clergy in Williamsburg hindered him every step of the way, he was ultimately successful.¹⁰⁸ The successes of these preachers in appealing to certain elites through the law would provide them with an important avenue for affecting further change in the cause of religious freedom.

These arrests did nothing to stop the progress of the Baptists. In fact, they helped to gain them more converts. The Baptist historian Robert Semple, who himself had been a lawyer prior to conversion in 1790, wrote that "Their persecutions so far from impending, really promoted their cause... Many of the leading men favored them, (some from one motive, and some from another) – their congregations were large, and when any of their men of talents preached they were crowded." Even Patrick Henry, who was then rising to fame from his work against the Church of England in the Parson's Cause, became an ally of the Baptists.¹⁰⁹ Among the most sympathetic was Thomas Jefferson. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson produced a rationalist argument for "free inquiry" of religion. Rather than desiring uniformity of religion, Jefferson argued that Virginians ought to embrace diversity in religious opinions as this is most likely to lead to truth and produce good public morals. Compelling individuals to follow a state religion would only lead to violence and hypocrisy. Just as Pennsylvania and New York had not

¹⁰⁷ Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, 30-31. For other examples of arrests, see Lewis Peyton Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, VA: J.P. Bell, 1938).

¹⁰⁸ James Ireland, *The Life of the Rev. James Ireland, who was, for many years, Pastor of the Baptist Church at Buck Marsh, Waterlick and Happy Church in Frederick and Shenandoah Counties, Virginia* (Winchester, VA: Printed by J. Foster, 1819), 177-178

¹⁰⁹ Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, 42

elected to establish one particular church, Virginia could do the same. In producing this argument, Jefferson was careful to note the extent to which dissenters had already filled the state. He estimated that they composed two-thirds of the population, a figure that is undoubtedly excessive. Nevertheless, their numbers were large enough for Jefferson to note that while “the laws indeed were still oppressive on them,” they had still “risen to a degree of determination which commanded respect.”¹¹⁰ Rather than viewing them as a force which might upset the order of society, Jefferson supported their right to worship without restraints.

The Baptists recognized that some elites were moving over to their side and sought to work with them more closely. In spite of their reputation as “disrupters,” they believed that elected officials had been put in place by God and deserved a certain amount of respect. The 1677 London Confession which the Regulars used had declared that God had given civil magistrates their authority, and therefore Christians ought to submit to them and their laws for the sake of the public good.¹¹¹ Even the Separate Baptists, who did not use creeds, would have been familiar with Romans 13:1-7 – the scriptural evidence which the London Confession used for this attitude toward authorities. Recognizing this, they appealed to the authorities through a long series of petitions.

From 1770 until 1784, the General Assembly received a flood of petitions from Baptist Associations across Virginia. Often these petitions paired the marriage issue with reformation of the vestries. Citizens of Amelia County, the Anglican minister Devereux Jarratt’s home, sent a petition on May 12, 1780 that asked for the dissolution of the present vestry, which they

¹¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. David Waldstreicher, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 190-194

¹¹¹ *A Confession Of Faith Put forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations Of Christians...* (London: Benjamin Harris, 1677), 81-81

propositioned should be elected thereafter, in the same petition that also requested the legalization of marriages solemnized by dissenting ministers. It had eighty-two signatures and was agreed to by both houses with amendments, but no further action was taken after that. In that same year, Baptist associations from Spotsylvania and Charlotte Counties also sent petitions to the legislature, but neither produced tangible results. There were many other petitions, but none of them seemed to result in any change until the 1780s, when a bill granting dissenters the right to practice their own marriage ceremonies finally passed.¹¹² But even then, there was still much more to do before the Baptists could achieve the full legal equality they sought.

Fortunately, the Baptists did receive a small legal victory when the Virginia Declaration of Rights was passed on June 12, 1776. The sixteenth article declared “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our CREATOR, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence, and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity, towards each other.”¹¹³ The references to “reason and conviction” reflect the same enlightenment influence that Jefferson later implemented in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. But, as is evident by Jefferson making that argument so many years afterward, the principles of this article failed to produce real results.

One of the most important areas of inequality to which the Baptists turned their attention was the lack of legal recognition for marriages which their ministers solemnized. According to Virginia law, marriages had to be performed by Anglican clergy in order to be considered

¹¹² Randolph W. Church, ed. *Virginia Legislative Petitions 1776-1782*. (Richmond: Virginia State Library), 357, 373, and 389. Other petitions from Baptists arguing for the recognition of marriages performed by dissenting ministers are on p. 323 and 494; Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 184-85; For the text of “An act declaring what shall be a lawful marriage,” see Hening, *Statutes*, Vol. 10 p. 361-362

¹¹³ Hening, *Statutes*, Vol. 9, 164-167

legal.¹¹⁴ For Baptists, this condition was intolerable. Just as they had said regarding the lack of licenses for their preachers, the Baptists believed that their marriages were ordained by God and therefore not subject to the interference of civil authorities. Worse still, despite their concern with morality, they could be charged with illegal “cohabitation” if their marriages were not solemnized in an Anglican church. Because the Baptists had few representatives of their denomination in the General Assembly, they had to bring about change by other means. The “Plan for the form of solemnization of Marriage” which the Baptist Association in Cumberland, Virginia produced was printed in Pinkney’s *Virginia Gazette*. Perhaps in an attempt to show Anglicans that they did not differ as much in religious practices as commonly believed, the plan included phrases to include in the ceremony which were very similar to those in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Both featured the engaged couple holding each other’s right hand and vowing to love and cherish one another until death parted them. Likewise complying with the law, the plan also noted that “public notice of the intention of the parties to marry” would be made in the place of worship just as the banns were announced in Anglican churches. Throughout this plan, there was a clear desire to demonstrate that the Baptists adhered to the same beliefs about marriage as Anglicans and therefore ought to be granted full equality.¹¹⁵

The Baptists eventually gained the right to perform their own marriages, but that was not enough. They had come to realize that the Anglican establishment was so oppressive that its connection with the state needed to be completely severed. John Leland wrote, “Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for, is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration, is

¹¹⁴ Hening *Statutes*, I:49-51

¹¹⁵ “A Plan for the form of solemnization of Marriage...” Pinkney, *Virginia Gazette*, Sept. 21, 1775. For comparison, see “The Solemnization of Matrimony” in *The Book of Common Prayer*. London: John Baskerville, 1762.

despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest, to grant indulgence; whereas, all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians.”¹¹⁶ It was a dramatic change from the idea of toleration which had been the goal of earlier dissenters. According to Leland, *all* people needed to enjoy the same right to worship, otherwise there could be no sincere faith or conversions. It was an ambitious goal, and as their petitions went unanswered, for a time it seemed unrealizable.

In 1784, however, the Baptists found an ally of sorts in James Madison, a longtime champion of religious liberty. While inclined toward the more rationalist arguments of Jefferson, Madison nevertheless understood the Baptist position. Madison represented Orange County, which had a large Baptist population.¹¹⁷ He had expressed his sympathy for the cause of the Baptists a decade earlier in a letter to William Bradford on April 1, 1774. After commenting on the petitions that the Baptists were expected to send to the assembly, Madison wrote that he thought it was unlikely they would succeed in bringing about change since during the last session, “such incredible and extravagant stores were told in the House of the monstrous effects of the Enthusiasm prevalent among the Sectaries and so greedily swallowed by their Enemies that I believe they lost footing by it and the bad name they still have with those who pretend too much contempt to examine into their principles and Conduct and are too much devoted to the ecclesiastical establishment to hear of the Toleration of Dissentients.” For this reason he was “apprehensive” that their enthusiasm and overall conduct would once again serve as “a pretext for rejecting their requests.” Madison did not voice outright support for the Baptists, but he recognized that they had been portrayed falsely and tacitly expressed sympathy for their plight.

¹¹⁶ Leland, *Writings*, 118.

¹¹⁷ Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 206.

Later in the same letter, he criticized the establishment for its “dependence on Bishops and Crown,” along with the ways that they used “all their art & Interest to depress their rising Adversaries; for such they must consider dissenters who rob them of the good will of the people and may in time endanger their livings & security.”¹¹⁸ Certainly no fan of the established church, Madison recognized that the Anglicans were suppressing the Baptists and would do all he could to ensure that they and believers of other religions had the right to free worship.

Madison’s support became most important in 1786 when the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom was up for debate. Thomas Jefferson had written it, but at that time he was performing diplomatic duties in Paris. That left his close associate Madison with the task of bringing it to resolution. This was by no means an easy task. First there was the Episcopalian opposition (after the separation from Britain, the Anglican Church became known as the Episcopal Church.) Since so many of the delegates in Virginia’s General Assembly still belonged to this denomination, Thomas Buckley believes they could have instituted a new “Church of Virginia” that would have given tolerance to dissenters but still would have remained the established church. After all, “the sixteenth article of the Declaration of Rights had not intended a wall of separation between church and state, and the delegates in 1776 made it abundantly clear that no such eventuality was desired.”¹¹⁹ Another alternative was multiple establishment, in which several Christian denominations would enjoy the privileges of the former Anglican Church. Other states had already moved toward this, and in 1779 a “Bill concerning Religion” attempted to do the same. It very well could have been the same in Virginia. However, that did not occur. Instead the General Assembly chose to take the most liberal course of action, allowing

¹¹⁸ William T. Hutchinson and William M.E. Rachal, eds. *The Papers of James Madison, Vol. 1*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 112

¹¹⁹ Buckley, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia*, 173

full freedom of religion. Buckley credits this development to the petitions which “engulfed the legislature” during the year the bill was passed. The majority of these were from Baptist associations, who, as shown earlier, had sent petitions nearly every year during the preceding decade asking for reform. Even though they were not always well-argued, they nevertheless showed a willingness to become involved with the affairs of the state to bring about religious change.¹²⁰

Far from a separatist group, the Baptists frequently involved themselves with the rest of society whenever they saw an injustice or evil which they felt required correction. Anglicans and members of the secular world generally did not appreciate their intrusion, but they acknowledged through the fears and criticisms expressed in their public and private writings that the Baptists had the ability to change the structure of society around them. Despite their reputation as outsiders, the denomination’s members embraced members of all classes, from poor farmers and slaves to wealthy planters like Robert Carter. Some of them were also highly educated and used their knowledge to produce complex arguments for their religion and later for the cause of religious freedom. In all of these ways, the Baptists showed that their conversionist message could affect anyone’s life, and had the potential to improve society just as it improved an individual man or woman’s soul.

¹²⁰ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 262; Buckley, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia*, 174-176

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