

2015

# Revolutionary Reverence: The Politics of Memory and Identity in the Baptist Church of post-Revolutionary Virginia

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Revolutionary Reverence:  
The Politics of Memory and Identity in the Baptist Church of post-Revolutionary  
Virginia

by

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A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

Lehigh University

8/5/2015

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## Abstract

In order to legitimize their sect and appeal to the wider American public, Virginia Baptists in the early Republic collectively wrote their own history in a manner that emphasized their Revolutionary political heritage almost as much as it emphasized their religiosity. In doing so, Baptist leaders and historians memorialized the actions of their forebears in ways that placed them squarely within the political discourse of nationalism, and specifically utilized their struggle for religious freedom as evidence of a legitimate claim to America's national identity and heritage. After the Revolution, various peoples attempted to delineate a national identity that was both inclusive of the nation's many different inhabitants, and also held an idealistic standard for those inhabitants to constantly strive toward. As this fictive national identity existed in a state of constant contestation, various, but not all peoples had the opportunity to lay claim to the growing concept of American nationalism.

## Introduction

At a meeting of the Baptist General Committee in Goochland county on Friday, March 7, 1788, delegates of four different Virginia Baptist associations first discussed, “whether the new federal constitution... made sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty; on which it was agreed unanimously, that... it did not,” and then the committee resolved, “that Samuel Harris, John Williams, Simeon Walton, John Leland, Henry Toler and Lewis Lunsford, be appointed to collect materials for compiling and publishing a *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, and report to the next general committee.”<sup>1</sup> The importance of this meeting resonated in the writings of Baptist historians both during the era of the early republic and for the century that followed. The writing of an official history of the Baptists, commissioned the by the General Committee, passed from compiler to compiler until Robert Baylor Semple collected all of the materials gathered by his various predecessors, and eventually concluded the monumental work in 1810. Semple’s detailed work, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, inclusive of the various accounts of many of his revolutionary era peers, provided the foundation for the dynamic memorializing efforts of the numerous Baptist historians that followed in his footsteps.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, ed. G. W. Beale (Richmond: Pitt & Dickerson, 1804), 77-78.

<sup>2</sup> Describing the importance of the meeting of the General Committee, W. P. Harvey asserted it deserved “to rank with that at Runnymede in 1215 A.D., when the barons of England wrenched from the iron grip of King John the Magna Charta; a meeting pregnant with the same invincible purpose as that of Philadelphia in 1776, when the immortals signed the Declaration of Independence,” in “Sketch of the Life and Times of William Hickman, Sr.,” *Publications of the Kentucky Baptist Historical Society, No. 1*, ed. W. J. McGlothlin (Louisville, KY: Baptist World Publishing Co., 1910), 17-18.

The desire of the Baptists to publish a record of their own history speaks to the mindset of early American nationalism, where the recent boom in the popularity and accessibility of print allowed for various groups to proclaim themselves truly American in a definitive manner. Often, this process played out in newspapers and pamphlets, as public debates and assertions of nationalism by partisan groups constantly redefined what it meant to be a true American. However, the discourse was not limited to circulatory accounts. The writing of histories, on all scales, including regional, partisan, denominational, and ultimately national, allowed for a process of continual redefinition of identity, as many groups sought to claim a heritage to the true sense of nationhood. The Baptists, long supporters of the cause for religious liberty entered into the public arena of political discourse by claiming their heritage of nationalism in order to advance their own political agenda. While proponents of this Baptist nationalism found their roots in other contemporary public assertions of American national heritage, they set themselves apart both by claiming a heritage to Revolutionary ideology that predated American patriotism, as well as by attributing to their cause a sense of sacred significance. In laying claim to American nationalism, Baptists of the early republic began to exhibit a sense of collective political identity that was largely based on non-religious factors, and in several instances resulted in a perceived compromise of the religiosity that was so evident in their earlier accounts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Several scholars have contributed varying views on the creation of identity, particularly a national identity in the early American republic. By analyzing the public festive culture that existed in the early republic, David Waldstreicher contends that the proclaiming of a political ideology called it into being. To Waldstreicher, the notion of nationalism was borne out of a large-scale public competition to claim the legitimate American national identity for political gain. Such a competition manifested itself in public

This paper argues that in order to further legitimize their sect and appeal to the wider public, Virginia Baptists in the early Republic collectively wrote their own history in a manner that emphasized their Revolutionary political heritage almost as much as it emphasized their religiosity. In order to do so, Baptist leaders and historians memorialized the actions of their forebears in ways that placed them squarely within the political discourse of nationalism, and specifically utilized their struggle for religious freedom as evidence of a legitimate claim to America's national identity and heritage. The Virginia Baptists of the early republic experienced an ideological shift from their forebears that reflected the changes occurring in American society at large. After the Revolution, various peoples attempted to delineate a national identity that was both inclusive of the nation's many different

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arenas such as celebrations, toasts, and festivals, and then transmitted from locale to locale via newspapers, in , *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Simon Newman constructs an argument very similar to Waldstreicher, as he also analyzes festive culture in the early national period and its transmission via newspaper reporting. Newman states, "this sharing of information made possible the emergence of a common national language of ritual activity [and] this symbiotic relationship between the early national press and an emerging national festive culture furnished the people who mounted, participated in, and watched these rites and festivals with an awareness that they were acting on both a local and a national stage," in *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 3; Joyce Appleby maintains, it was through the "self-conscious task of elaborating the meaning of the American Revolution" that the post-revolutionary generation of Americans negotiated the memories passed down to them by their families and through the public arena in order to work "out the social forms for the new nation," and negotiate the new national identity. Building off of Waldstreicher's argument that the press took over as the major conduit for cultural transmission, Appleby contends that, "as more and more children became literate and literacy itself acted as the matrix for advice, exhortation, example, knowledge, and information," traditional networks of cultural transmission such as families and churches gave way to public and print networks, in *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 5, 20; This work, like so many other works of history over the past twenty years, owes much of its understanding of the public sphere to Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1<sup>st</sup> Paperback edition, 1991). Habermas contended that a separate public sphere arose in the eighteenth century in which social political ideology was discussed and debated, particularly in the press and political journals. In such an arena of public discussion, religion, once disestablished from government, too became open to debate.

inhabitants, and also held an idealistic standard for those inhabitants to constantly strive toward. As this fictive national identity existed in a state of constant contestation, various, but not all peoples had the opportunity to lay claim to the growing concept of American nationalism. As a national political culture developed, several religious leaders engaged in public contests of nationalism in order to increase their religious groups' hold on the moral governance of American society, but they did so in ways that suggested to many other religious leaders a general declension in religiosity from prerevolutionary times. Exclamations of declension serve as evidence that Baptist nationalism did exist, as several ministers and other Baptist leaders lamented the effects of political participation on Baptist piety.<sup>4</sup>

Though the term Baptist nationalism is used throughout this work to explain the actions and ideologies of post-Revolutionary Baptists, it is perhaps best explained within the context of the discourse on nationalism and the politics of public opinion, most aptly argued by historians David Waldstreicher and Simon

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<sup>4</sup> Much has been written on the effects of institutionalization on hyper-religious sects, and the compromise of piety that generally accompanied that process. In his ground-breaking controversial work, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* in 1990, Jon Butler revised the historiography on American Christianity that had traditionally placed New England's Puritanism at the center of the story. Instead, Butler contends, "America's religious identity emerged out of choices made among many available religious forms. America's spiritual pluralism, including an often powerful indifference to things religious, was apparent in its European forbears before colonization, and their pluralism became even more complex in the New World social and cultural environment." Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 6. Butler asserts, the Baptists, in their creation of associations, traveled down a path of institutionalized organization that connected their various independently-governed churches under a more centralized banner in order to affect social change. Butler states, the Baptists, "a religious people renowned for precision and institutional propriety were creating ways to manage church adherence in a vigorously mobile New World society." In doing so, the Baptists, as well as other dissenting sects such as the Methodists and Presbyterians, "fashioned sophisticated, complex, and authoritative denominational institutions...they moved toward the exercise of authority, not away from it, and they understood that individual religious observance prospered best in the New World environment through the discipline of coercive institutional authority," Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 123, 128.

Newman. Waldstreicher defines nationalism as “the ideology of the ‘imagined community,” which “is imagined and practiced locally in distinct, changing ways by different groups for a variety of purposes.”<sup>5</sup> According to Waldstreicher, nationalism is just as much about conflict as it is about consensus. The idea of a national identity was born out of a competition over who could legitimately lay claim to such an identity. Being under constant contestation, that identity remained a fictive ideal that multiple groups from varying backgrounds increasingly negotiated. The mythical nature that competing peoples ascribed to the idea of a national identity proved a semblance of an American consensus regardless of the contestations over its meanings and application. In essence, the contest over the meaning of national identity bespoke its very existence. Public assertions to prove the rightful claim to national identity gave life to the fiction. Waldstreicher’s nationalism was created, negotiated, and constantly redefined in a public arena of dynamic discourse.

The battle of nationalism manifested itself in public arenas, as contestants documented and transmitted their assertions of American identity via the explosive growth of print culture in eighteenth-century America. American political enthusiasts frequently coopted newspapers in order to connect disparate peoples through shared ideologies. Simon Newman’s *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, argues that the creation of a “national popular political culture” came about through public participation in celebrations and in the national dialogues caused by the newspaper coverage of such events. Thanks to the rise in print culture, public

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<sup>5</sup> Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 10.

opinions were not confined to regional localities, and instead, through the continual transmission of information, events, celebratory and otherwise could be read about, replicated, and retransmitted to others. Such a reciprocal process of information sharing turned public opinions into a larger context of a more nationally shared public opinion that was constantly negotiated.<sup>6</sup>

The explosive growth of print culture in the early American republic also made possible the memorialization of political ideologies through the practice of writing history. Eve Kornfeld describes the process of recording early American histories as the preservation of memory, both private and public, in ways that manipulated the meanings of the past in order to align with the values of the present. Kornfeld contends early Americans labored under the supposition that, “If historians could conceive of America as a nation and give it a national history, perhaps a sense of national identity and unity would follow.” Americans wanted to write nationalism into being by claiming it existed prior to their writing of it. David Ramsay, described by Kornfeld as one of the earliest and most prominent historians of early America, “devoted much of his life to the creation of a unified American

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<sup>6</sup> Speaking of the importance of print culture to American politics, Simon Newman states, “newspapers constituted the principal source of news and information for many American citizens and were vital to these festive occasions, for while many Americans were taking part in or watching these events, even more were reading about them in local or more distant newspapers.” According to Newman, the rise in print culture, evidenced by the exponential rise in the number of newspapers, went hand in hand with the rise of a sense of American identity. Newspapers allowed for both a national audience of local events, as well as a national dialogue between the participants of those events. Newman refers to the sharing of festive culture via newspapers and print media, especially the celebrations of national events such as Independence Day commemorations, as leading to the “emergence of a common national language of ritual activity,” that created a “symbiotic relationship between the early national press and an emerging national festive culture,” and “furnished the people who mounted, participated in, and watched these rites and festivals with an awareness that they were acting on both a local and a national stage,” in *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xiii, 3.

culture, and he recognized that history could play a special role in constructing a sense of national identity and destiny for his contemporaries and posterity alike.” According to Kornfeld, in his attempt to write a national identity into being in 1785, Ramsay projected on the nation the values that he saw as tantamount to a sense of nationalism. Ramsay illustrated those values by stating, “I trust that America will eventually prove the asylum for liberty learning religion & et & that the civil & religious rights of mankind will be most effectually guarded by our democratic legislatures.”<sup>7</sup>

This work analyzes the various ways that Baptist writers manipulated memories, both public and private when composing their histories in order to contribute to the discourse on nationalism. Applying to this subject a history of memory approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the changes that occurred both within Baptist societies, and in America at large during the era of the early American republic. Scholars engaged with the history of memory contend it is

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<sup>7</sup> Eve Kornfeld argues Ramsay’s most important contribution to the creation of a sense of nationalism laid in his development of “a new mythical figure, the ‘American Colonist.’” According to Kornfeld, Ramsay’s American Colonist was the embodiment of all of the ideals that marked America as exceptional from the European nations of the eighteenth century. What set Ramsay’s American Colonist apart from his European forbears was “a warm love for liberty, a high sense of the rights of human nature, and a predilection for independence,” all of which, according to Kornfeld, were able to flourish in the colonies given their “distance from the source of power in England, the vastness of the American landscape, a general social equality in the colonies,” and the profound influence of Protestant value systems. Ramsay’s mythical American colonist embodied the notion of a single national identity based upon the shared fundamental similarities of the diverse peoples who inhabited the various regions of the nascent nation. Those fundamental similarities, according to Ramsay were a belief “that God made all mankind originally equal: that he endowed them with the rights of life, property, and as much liberty as was consistent with the rights of others...and that all government was a political institution between men naturally equal, not for the aggrandizement of one, or a few, but for the general happiness of the whole community.” By creating the myth of the American Colonist to represent a national character, authors such as Ramsay essentially wrote into existence a fictive national identity that gave others something to aspire to while its tenets remained locked in the dynamic process of being continually defined, debated, and then redefined in the public arena. This negotiation process allowed for differing groups of people to interpret national identity, as well as their own heritage in ways that emphasized their group’s significance, in *Creating an American Culture, 1775-1800: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 40-41.

a process of recording the negotiation and redefinition of past events and figures in order for the past to better justify the ideas and actions of the present. As David Thelen asserts, “the struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interest and values in the present.” Thelen, contributing to the school of history of memory in 1989, describes a process in which “actors appeal for popular support by claiming the sanction of the past, [and] people test such public appeals against their personal and private memories.” This work illustrates the ways in which the post-Revolutionary Virginia Baptists fit Thelen’s theory on historical memory as they contend with other Americans for national legitimacy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> David Thelen contributed invaluable to the history of memory school of methodology with his article, “Memory and American History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989), 1127. According to Thelen, “the historical study of memory would be the study of how families, larger gatherings of people, and formal organizations selected and interpreted identifying memories to serve changing needs. It would explore how people together searched for common memories to meet present needs, how they first recognized such a memory and then agreed, disagreed, or negotiated over its meaning, and finally how they preserved and absorbed that meaning into their ongoing concerns,” Thelen, “Memory and American History,” 1123; Several other scholars have engaged in the methodology outlined by Thelen in order assess the contribution of public memory to collective identity, especially in regards to American national identity. Alfred Young, in *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, identifies “George Robert Twelves Hewes, a man with a name you did not forget,” who participated in many of the actions of the Sons of Liberty in prerevolutionary Boston, most especially the Boston Tea Party. In his work, Young comments, that though Hewes was a contributor to such a legendary event, his name was mostly missing from the record books and histories of early America until, in the 1830s, two memoirs were published on Hewes’ life when he was acknowledged as the last living participant of the Tea Party. Young contends, Hewes’ public importance, which had arrived both swiftly and suddenly, and not until after fifty years of obscurity, was also completely dependent on the public’s perception of Hewes’ contribution to and participation in Revolutionary events, specifically the Tea Party, which had by the 1830s begun to achieve a new sort of significance in the public arena of nationalist discourse. Utilizing the works of social scientists and psychologists, Alfred Young determined to analyze not just the events of Hewes’ life, but his memory of those events. Young paid particular attention to the context of the times when Hewes was interviewed for his memoirs. As a disclaimer, Young admitted that on a scale of validity for historical sources, “an eyewitness is better than a secondhand report, and an account taken down at the time better than one recalled years later, [so] according to this scale, a memoir written late in life is flawed, and a memoir ‘as told to’ someone else, or strained through another voice, is doubly flawed.” Young’s solution to his problem of evidential reliability was not to analyze the events of Hewes’ memory from a standpoint of historical accuracy, but rather to analyze the ways in which Hewes remembered those events, as well as the reception that Hewes’ account received among the public at large fifty years after the events of the Revolution. Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), xi-xii.

Many scholars of Southern Baptist history have emphasized or at the least noted the Baptists' contribution to the early American national identity, particularly in regards to religious disestablishment and freedom of conscience. Beginning with Rhys Isaac in 1982, scholars of Virginia Baptist history found a close connection between the actions of the evangelical Baptists and the political changes that occurred in Revolutionary-era Virginia. Isaac's contention that Virginia underwent two revolutions, not just political, but social and religious as well, is based upon his assessment that Virginia's elites responded to a shift away from a deferential social order by adapting to new modes of authority practiced by evangelists and common people. In Isaac's telling, the Baptists' refusal to acknowledge traditional channels of social authority and deference forced Virginia's elites to adapt to the more republican ideology that the Baptists touted at just the time the imperial crisis arose. According to Isaac, the Revolution restored the elites to the top of the social order as prominent figures such as Patrick Henry mastered the art of condescension to Baptists and other ordinary people.<sup>9</sup>

Monica Najar in 2008 differentiates her work from Isaac's by contending that Baptists in the post-Revolutionary South provided for their congregations an alternate set of institutions that performed religious, as well as civil functions by

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<sup>9</sup> Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), Isaac discusses the Anglican interweaving of notions of sacred and secular on pages 58-64; he discusses the rise of evangelicalism in Virginia, the ideals of the Separate Baptists, and the importance of the conversion experience on pages 161-168; he discusses the "double character" of Baptists in their use of self-regulation through ideas of "orderly," and "disorderly" behaviors, as well as the ways these ideas were seen as a challenge to the established order by Anglican authorities on pages 169-177; Isaac specifically discusses the imprisonment, and abuse of Baptist ministers on pages 192-193.

offering a “form of citizenship” to church members, including those who were typically disempowered such as women and slaves. In essence, while Najar’s Baptists did contend directly with the established Virginia social order for power, they also managed to circumvent that social order completely by relying on their own institutions in matters both sacred and secular. This was particularly the case as settlers spread out farther and farther into the frontiers first of the Virginia piedmont region, and then into Kentucky. Najar focuses on the dynamic interplay between Baptists and civil institutions in an era where Americans engaged in a process of redefining the “relationship and boundaries between the religious and civil realms on both the national and local levels.” As a result, according to Najar, Baptists empowered their churches with great authority over the lives of church members, exercising this authority in their neighborhoods, business places, courthouses, and homes. Through their interventions in such matters as marriage, slavery, and commerce, Baptist churches reshaped gender and race—two of the central elements of authority in southern society—and claimed many of the functions of a civil government.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Monica Najar, in *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), contends the jurisdiction that Southern Baptists asserted over their congregations included a great many civil affairs and resulted in a sort of alternate “‘citizenship’ for their members, including those excluded from definitions of citizenship during the revolutionary and early national periods,” 90; Najar contends that in the years after the Revolution, while “the new nation was still in the process of constructing a self-consciously republican political culture,” the Baptist Church was able to address the chaos of political identity on the most local levels, mostly by exerting authority over what had been considered the private domains of the lives of the members of its congregations. Once such authority was established, the Baptist Church was able to fundamentally assert itself in the secular arena, but with sacred intentions, 130; Jewel Spangler, also writing in 2008, changed the direction of the discourse by disputing contentions that Virginia Baptists enjoyed relative egalitarianism thanks to their frontier habitation. Instead, Spangler argues that Baptists’ methods of expansion changed drastically after the Revolution. Of the pioneer-generation, Spangler asserts, “organizational methods and strategies were crucial to their expansion, [as] it was ministers, revival meetings, and baptisms that were most instrumental in delivering the Baptist message to potential converts.” The Baptists after the war, Spangler contends,

Deconstructing the relationship of the Baptists and Southern society after the Revolution, Christine Leigh Heyrman in 1997 sought to recover “a world marooned from living memory in which evangelicals, far from dominating the South, were viewed by most whites as odd at best and subversive at worst.” To Heyrman, the resonant effects of Southern memory placed religiosity at the forefront of the South’s very identity, but her work rediscovers a time when the South was anything but the religious hotbed that has come to be known as “the Bible Belt.” Heyrman argues that a shared collective identity existed not just between the disparate Baptists, but among “all evangelicals in the early American South, a diverse group composed mainly of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians.” What unified these various religious groups was what Heyrman describes as the “language of Canaan,” or the experience of religious conversion that “made them conversant with others who, by their own singular pilgrimages, had also come to learn the common language.”<sup>11</sup> By contending the evangelical groups created a form of collective consciousness, Heyrman illustrates the importance of the growth of the public opinion in early America. Building off of the themes explored in the changing discourse of religious history, this thesis seeks not only to explicate the role played

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drew in new “potential converts through their efforts to organize and advertise their support for the patriot cause and to compete in a newly unregulated religious environment.” Through their engagement in public arenas and their adaptation to public rhetoric, Baptists gained both converts and denominational respectability in the post-Revolutionary era. Another reason for the successful expansion of the Baptists in post-Revolutionary America, Spangler contends was merely happenstance. Asserting the imperial crisis fostered a spread of republican ideology that was highly compatible to the value system being preached by Baptist ministers, Spangler states “Virginians, for example, became more concerned with personal virtue and sought to suppress an excessive interest in the pleasures of the world at just the moment when Baptists began calling upon them to purge sin from their lives and live for the Lord,” in *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 2-6.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 6.

by Virginia Baptists of post-Revolutionary America in the formation of an early national identity, but also to assess the ways in which the Baptists remembered and redefined their contribution to that identity.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, the writers of early Virginia Baptist history engaged in a memorializing process that continually built off of itself over time, as each generation of reflective Baptist historians included in their work the commemorative accounts left by the preceding generation. Semple in 1810 cited prerevolutionary writings of Baptist leaders such as John Taylor, Morgan Edwards, John Leland, James Ireland, David Thomas, and David Barrow. Subsequent Baptist historians, in turn memorialized both Semple's own efforts, as well as the Baptist forebears he commemorated, enlarging the memorial story along the way. William Fristoe and David Benedict, contemporaries of Semple each added a history, first in 1808, and then in 1813, utilizing the same sources as Semple, but each writing from a narrower focus. Ensuing post-Revolutionary reflective writings include James Taylor's *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, first published in 1837 and Robert Boyle Howell's *Early Baptists of Virginia*, written as an address to the American Baptist Historical Society in 1856. These histories were increasingly recommemorated by other subsequent Baptist historians all the way into the twentieth century by the likes of J. H. Spencer in 1885, Charles F. James in 1900, George W. Ranck in 1910,

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<sup>12</sup> Other influential works that engage in a history of memory methodology in order to better explore the notion of identity in the early republic include, Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); Robert E. Cray, "Memorialization and Enshrinement: George Whitefield and Popular Religious Culture, 1770-1850," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10, no. 3 (Autumn, 1990); and Cray, "Major John Andre and the Three Captors: Class Dynamics and Revolutionary Memory Wars in the Early Republic, 1780-1831," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997).

and Lewis Peyton Little in 1938. By the twentieth century, the mythology of the prerevolutionary Virginia Baptists depended more upon reflective literature and folklore than it did on primary accounts. To further complicate the discourse, many of the Baptists who experienced life in Revolutionary Virginia did not publish their first-hand accounts until the end of their lives, bringing into question the reliability of the source. Not only were the writers' memories subject to years of misremembrance, the social and political conditions in which the writers recollected had drastically changed. Thelen addresses this phenomenon when he contends, that "since an individual's starting points change as the person grows and changes, people reshape their recollections of the past to fit their present." The various Baptist commemorators likely engaged in a process of remembering their history in the context of their present situations. This work focuses heavily on that process.<sup>13</sup>

### Part One: Commemorating Persecution and Claiming the Revolution

The Baptists' colonial experience of persecution and imprisonment at the hands of Virginia's established Anglican Church provided ample political ammunition for their early commemorative histories. Despite the existence of an act intended to allow for religious toleration, minority religious sects in Virginia often found themselves both politically and legally marginalized by an Anglican

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<sup>13</sup> Thelen goes on to contend, "In order to simplify their associations, people conflate details from similar experiences into a generalized recollection that can stand for a class of experiences," in "Memory and American History," 1121.

Church deeply entwined in British colonial politics.<sup>14</sup> Such marginalization was partly due to fundamental differences in theology, but the larger factor was the preservation of local social authority networks. Under the impression the Baptists declared war on their monopoly of religious influence, the Anglicans responded through the secular avenue of civil authority. According to the Reverend John Leland, as the Anglicans sounded the “the usual alarm of the *Church and State* being in danger... Magistrates began to issue their warrants, and sheriffs had their orders to take up the *disturbers of the peace*.... Preaching, teaching, or exhorting, was what disturbed the peace.”<sup>15</sup> Several Baptist ministers were given the choice to avoid jail so long as “they would not preach in the county for the term of one year; but most of them preferred the dungeon to such bonds. Not only ministers were imprisoned, but others, for only praying in their families, with a neighbor or two.”<sup>16</sup> In the end, cases of persecution, abuse, and imprisonment served to remind the Baptists that as inhospitable as the religious climate in Virginia had been, a world of possibility awaited them when the Revolution broke out. This section traces the evolution of the ways that Virginia Baptists memorialized their prerevolutionary persecution narratives in order to better position themselves as owning a history of republican principles that aligned with the ideology of the Revolutionary era.

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<sup>14</sup> Najar exemplifies the marriage of authority between the Anglican Church and Virginia’s elites by stating, “the governor could assign a minister to a parish when the vestry failed to do so,” while conjointly, church wardens, in an assertion of secular authority could present “offenders to the county courts.” This relationship depended upon the preserving of the existing social hierarchy, and relied upon deference for its maintenance. Social elites were empowered by the church, and the church’s authority was reinforced by the social elites. In such an environment, the Anglican Church shaped colonial Virginia in a manner that upheld the status quo and left no room for dissenting religious groups. *Evangelizing the South*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Leland, *Writings of the Late Elder*, 97.

<sup>16</sup> Leland, *Writings of the Late Elder*, 97.

The life of James Ireland provides a prime example of Baptist memorialization, particularly in regards to the politicization of persecution. In his autobiography, the Reverend James Ireland recounted several of the tribulations he experienced as an itinerant Baptist minister in 1760s Virginia. Ireland's abusive persecution began when magistrates seized him on the charge of preaching without sanctioning from the Anglican bishop and locked him in Cullpepper jail. During Ireland's imprisonment, the public revealed its ambivalence as he continued to preach through the grated windows to the crowds that gathered outside. Allegedly, during these sermons, Ireland exclaimed "the wicked and persecutors would ride up at a gallop among my hearers, until I have seen persons of respectability under their horses feet." Worse yet, Ireland claimed that during another of his window sermons, while he stood preaching through the grate, those same persecutors "got a table, bench, or something else, stood upon it, and made their water right in my face!"<sup>17</sup> Ireland's other examples of persecution included attempts at suffocation by smoke, poisoning, threats of public whipping, and denial of food and wood for fire and warmth. Despite the torment set upon him, Ireland claimed to have converted several of his persecutors, including a group of intoxicated men who were "abusive at the tavern" and thrown into his cell. After mocking Ireland and his religious method, the inebriates allegedly left the next morning with thanks for his "kindness to them" and a new outlook on Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ireland, *Esteemed Reproach*, 127.

<sup>18</sup> Ireland, *Esteemed Reproach*, 128.

The folklorization of Ireland's account began even before the publication of his autobiography, and that folklorization then evolved over time, as Baptist historians continually adapted their writings to the concerns of the present. As Ireland lay in his deathbed in 1806, an amanuensis transcribed the account of his life. It was not published until 1819. Despite the fact Ireland's biography sat unpublished for thirteen years, Robert Semple still referred to it in his *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, which he published in 1810, indicating a level of collective awareness among the post-Revolutionary Baptist community. At the time of Ireland's telling, his memory must have been subject to the developments of the early American social and political environment, and his tale subject to the bias of his third-party transcriber. Still, after its publication, Ireland's account became widely heralded as a key piece of prerevolutionary Baptist history. Fristoe, in his rendition of the history of the Kettocton Baptist Association, gave a brief account of the life of James Ireland and his contribution to the association. In his telling, published in 1809, three years after Ireland's death, but ten years before the publication of Ireland's autobiography, Fristoe made no mention of Ireland's persecution, which later writers relied heavily upon both as proof of Ireland's piety, as well as proof of the religiosity of the Baptists in general. Unlike Semple, Fristoe must not have been privy to Ireland's autobiography. So instead of focusing on persecution, Fristoe merely mentioned that Ireland's "manner of preaching was very agreeable," and that after forty years of service to his congregation, "he was removed by death, in the spring of the year 1806 –and it is no wonder, that Zion trembled and felt her distress, when a pillar of this description fell." The lack of

emphasis on Ireland's travails in Fristoe's work illustrates the weight of Semple's influence upon the Baptist commemorative writing community that followed. Had Fristoe published his work after reading Semple's *Rise and Progress*, no doubt it would look very different.<sup>19</sup>

With the passing of the First Amendment in 1791, the religious liberty that prerevolutionary Baptists fought so hard for became a nation-wide reality. After which, accounts of prerevolutionary Baptists such as Ireland's, when told in the light of that struggle, were used not only to promote the religiosity of the denomination, but as evidence of the Baptists' rightful place in the annals of American history. Before Ireland's autobiography joined the discourse, very little existed of him in the histories already published outside of Semple's work. That changed after 1819, as accounts progressively reported on the memory of Ireland's persecution in resounding ways. The publication of Ireland's biography led many subsequent Baptist historians to memorialize him as a crucial figure to the prerevolutionary Baptist struggle for religious liberty. In this case, the history created the significance it sought to report.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> William Fristoe, *Concise History of the Kettocton Baptist Association, 1766-1808* (Staunton, VA: William Gilman Lyford, 1808; Primitive Baptist Online, 2008), Chapter 9 (no pagination). [http://www.primitivebaptist.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1015&Itemid=36](http://www.primitivebaptist.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1015&Itemid=36) (accessed June 10, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> No mention of Ireland is made in Morgan Edwards' 1772 Virginia Baptist history, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists in the Provinces of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia* (No Pub, 1772), Accessed February 3, 2014. <http://repository.clemson.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/jbt&CISOPTR=241&REC=1>. SCDL Collections by Clemson University Libraries; nor in "Morgan Edwards' 1772 Virginia Notebook," *The Virginia Baptist Register*, No. 18, ed. John S. Moore (1979).

Ireland's legend echoed with resounding effect even a century after his death. Using Ireland's imprisonment in Culpepper County to illustrate Baptist memorialists' "myth-making imagination in full swing," reflective Baptist historian, William Thom in 1900 analyzed the discourse. Thom criticized an 1860 reflective writing by J. B. Taylor, which he claimed took Ireland's recollection as a recording of fact. According to Thom, Taylor not only told of Ireland's imprisonment in a manner that assumed a dependable level of reliability in Ireland's account, but he also attributed divine intervention to the thwarting of the attempts made on Ireland's life, such as when he stated, "a scheme was also formed to poison him, but the mercy of God prevented." Despite his criticisms, Thom, in the twentieth century also embellished as he commemorated the Baptists' persecution. Asserting that, "thus urged by their religious, social, economic, and political likes and dislikes, the plain people of Virginia flocked into the Baptist Church and were only exasperated, not hindered, by the persecution to which their leaders were subjected," Thom credited the Baptists with a tremendous amount of social and political influence. However, Thom sought to distance himself from earlier commemorators of the previous century by scrutinizing their memorializing tactics while he commemorated in much the same manner.<sup>21</sup>

Persecution played a crucial role in defining the Baptist experience of prerevolutionary Virginia, and commemorative writers smartly utilized the memory of it to both Americanize and politicize themselves, especially in the wake and the

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor is quoted in William Taylor Thom, *The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Virginia: The Baptists* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1900), 20, 37.

context of the Revolution. Cleverly, Baptists connected the prerevolutionary Anglican establishment in Virginia with the monarchical authority structure that the colonies rebelled against in the Revolution. In so doing, the persecution that the members of that Anglican establishment delivered upon the Baptists provided direct evidence of the Baptists' prerevolutionary spirit of rebellion and antiauthoritarianism. David Benedict in 1813 glorified the persecuted Baptists of prerevolutionary Virginia when he stated, "without visible sword or buckler, they moved on steady to their purpose, undismayed by the terrific hosts of Satan, which were backed by the strong arm of civil authority. Magistrates and mobs, priests and sheriffs, courts and prisons, all vainly combined to divert them from their object." Such a statement concisely illustrated the desire of reflective Baptist writers to assert the unwavering piety of their predecessors in the face of adversity. The same statement also contended the existence of a civil awareness by Benedict's Baptist predecessors.<sup>22</sup>

Reflective Baptist writers generally cite Lewis Craig's incarceration in Spotsylvania in June of 1768 as the first case of imprisonment of a Baptist minister for preaching in Virginia. The evolution of the memorializing of Craig's imprisonment illustrates the power of persecution in the memory of Baptist writers. In 1810, Semple matter-of-factly detailed Craig's discharge from the Spotsylvania jail, and his subsequent trip to "Williamsburg to get a release for his companions," where he received a letter from the deputy-governor, John Blair, demanding the liberation of the imprisoned Baptists. In 1837, twenty-seven years after the

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<sup>22</sup> Benedict, *History of the Baptist Denomination*, 47.

publication of Semple's *Rise and Progress*, James Taylor penned *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*. In Taylor's account of Craig's imprisonment and plea to Williamsburg, the embellishment began. Taylor tellingly stated of Craig's reputation, that "it is interwoven in the history of many of her churches, and will continue to live in the memory of the pious, while time endures," thus indicating the beginning of a mythical status for Craig not dissimilar to that of the Revolutionary forefathers. Taylor quoted Blair's letter as stating, "the act of toleration (it being found by experience, that persecuting dissenters increases their numbers) has given them a right to apply, in a proper manner, for licensed houses, for the worship of God, according to their consciences." That Craig managed to obtain such governmental support, Taylor interpreted as evidence of an early political consciousness among the Baptists. To Taylor, Craig signaled an important bridge between the prerevolutionary Baptists' religiosity and a political acumen that informed the patriotic leaders of the Revolution, and provided the Baptists with a keystone in their claim of true American national heritage. Such an interpretation resonated deeply with reflecting writers who sought to Americanize the Virginia Baptists' struggle for religious liberty.<sup>23</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, the language of Baptist nationalist folklore permeated historical accounts, giving the tales of prerevolutionary persecution an almost legendary significance that better translated to audiences in search of Revolutionary rhetoric. Commissioned to compose a history of the early Virginia Baptists in 1856, minister, Robert Boyle Howell contended, while "they [Baptists]

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<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 84-87.

were beaten and imprisoned, and cruelty taxed its ingenuity to devise new modes of punishment and annoyance,” what followed was, perhaps predictably, that such “persecution made friends for its victims; and the men who were not permitted to speak in public, found willing auditors in the sympathizing crowds, who gathered around the prisons, to hear them preach from the grated windows.” Howell contended, persecution and imprisonment “furnished the Baptists with a common ground with which to make resistance.” Accounts such as Howell’s declared circumstances of persecution forced Virginia Baptists to take an oppositional stance, but that stance not only strengthened the church, it allowed the Baptists to develop the beginnings of a collective political consciousness as well, one that was truly American.<sup>24</sup>

## Part Two: Americanizing the Baptists

Reflective writers wrote into Baptist histories a trajectory of political action that began with Craig’s appeal of imprisonment and led eventually to support of and participation in the American Revolution. In order to Americanize their own history, various Baptist commemorators dug through historical records and emphasized anything that resembled the republican values and political rebellion that other nationalist writers employed in their assertions of American heritage. In the same manner that reflective writers memorialized the persecuted

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<sup>24</sup> Howell, *Early Baptists of Virginia*, 39-40.

prerevolutionary Baptists, they celebrated a heritage of egalitarianism and political action that they claimed directly influenced other American revolutionaries. This section analyzes the ways in which reflective writers emphasized specific examples of Virginia Baptist's political action in order to better lay claim to America's national heritage.

While myriad examples of such political action exist in Baptist commemorations, reflective writers often cite the meeting in August of 1775 of the General Association of Baptists in Virginia at Dupuy's Meeting House as a watershed event in the history of Baptist nationalism. At this historic meeting, representatives of the two previously dissonant districts, the Northern or Regular Baptists and the Southern or Separate Baptists converged "together for the abolition of the hierarchy, or church establishment, in Virginia." Prior to this meeting, the Regular and Separate Baptists fought vehemently over various religious subjects, chief among them, the tenets of Arminianism versus Predestination. At this unprecedented meeting, the previously discordant Baptists of Virginia unified under the banner of support for the Revolution and the dissolution of the Anglican establishment. Reflective writers, beginning with Semple in 1810, marked it as a milestone of the Virginia Baptists' political significance. Semple stated of the Virginia Baptists, "having been much ground under the British laws, or at least by the interpretation of them in Virginia; they were to a man, favourable to any revolution, by which they could obtain freedom of religion." By making such an assertion, Semple stressed the willingness of the Baptists to engage in what they already considered to be a largely political war, but one imbued with religious

significance. Reflective writers picked up on the important fact that the Baptists not only engaged in political action on a large scale during the Revolution, they set aside ecclesiastical differences in order to bolster their voice of discontent and magnify the effects of their political participation.<sup>25</sup>

Forty-six years after Semple's publication, the General Association meeting resonated further in Howell's reflective writings. Focusing on what the Baptists stood to lose should the Revolution fail, Howell stressed the meeting's significance by stating, "the conflict then commencing with Great Britain, was to their [the Baptists'] mind of dubious result. They unhappily appeared at least, unwilling to assume a position, from which, should we fail to achieve our liberties, they might not be able readily to recede." By reflectively assessing the consequences that might have accompanied failure, Howell stressed the patriotism of the Baptists' willingness to proceed. Detailing the specifically political aspects of the meeting, Howell remarked that the Reverends, "Jeremeiah Walker, John Williams, and George Roberts...were appointed to attend the meeting of the Convention, remain at the Capitol, mingle, and converse with the members, and to employ every honorable means to procure the ends proposed."<sup>26</sup> In other words, they were appointed to

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<sup>25</sup> Quotes from Semple, *Rise and Progress*, 62; John Leland explained the division between the Baptists in 1767, when, "The northern members called themselves, 'Regular Baptists,' and the southern members called themselves, 'Separate Baptists.'" Explicating the differences between the two districts, Leland stated, "The Regulars, adhered to a confession of faith, first published in London, 1689, and afterwards adopted by the Baptist Association of Philadelphia, in 1742; but the Separates had none but the Bible....The Regulars were orthodox Calvinists, and the work under them was solemn and rational; but the Separates were the most zealous, and the work among them was very noisy," in Leland, *Writings*, 96-98.

<sup>26</sup> Quotes from Howell, *Early Baptists*, 66-67; The actions of the Virginia Baptists at the Virginia Convention of 1775 resonated not only among subsequent generations of Baptists, but among other groups who also competed in the nationalist arena. The reflective writing by Episcopalian historian, Francis Lister Hawks provides a counter-perspective, as he painted a very different picture of the

lobby at the Virginia Convention for the Baptist cause. The important result of such lobbying, Howell contended, was the forming of acquaintances with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Patrick Henry, the three of which proved crucial allies when the proposal was read to the convention. Writing in 1864, J. T. Headley further attempted to Americanize the Revolutionary contributions of the early Baptist Church. Of the Revolutionary Baptists', Headley stated that they, "though not so imposing a denomination in numbers at the time...nevertheless threw the weight of their influence, whatever it might be, on the side of the colonies." This all-in interpretation of the Baptists' early sense of patriotism clearly advanced the agenda of Baptist nationalism.<sup>27</sup>

Just as commemorations of the General Association's 1775 meeting served to Americanize the Baptists' collective decision to revolt against the British government, other Revolutionary-era examples illustrate reflective Baptist writers' tendency to conflate their struggles for religious freedom with the American cause

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Baptists and their revolutionary intentions in 1836. Hawks reflected that, "in 1775, the storm which had so long been gathering, burst upon America, and the first blood was spilled at Lexington...The Baptists were not slow in discovering the advantageous position in which the political troubles of the country had placed them." Hawks contended the Baptists' numbers forced an influence on the Convention that could not be ignored, and that the Baptists "knew this, and therefore determined to turn the circumstance to their profit as a sect. Persecution had taught them not to love the establishment, and they now saw before them a reasonable prospect of overturning it entirely." Hawks contended the Baptists, as a group, called upon their history to manipulate the Convention into political action. In his own reflective account, Hawks asserted the Baptists' motivation was to wage a "war of extermination" against the Episcopal Church. Hawks concluded the Baptists "revenged themselves for their sufferings, by the almost total ruin of the [Ecclesiastical] church: and now commenced the assault, for, inspired by the ardours of a patriotism which accorded with their interests, or willing to avail themselves of a favourable opportunity to present, in their case, an advantageous contrast to a part of the church, they addressed the convention, and informed that body that their religious tenets presented no obstacle to their taking up arms and fighting for the country...This, it is believed, was the first step made towards placing the clergy, of all denominations, upon an equal footing in Virginia," in Francis Lister Hawks, *Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of the United States of America, Vol. 1* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 137-8.

<sup>27</sup> Headley quotes first from Semple, then from Howell in *Chaplains and Clergy*, 50.

of civil liberty. In 1808, William Fristoe delineated various “Reasons why the Baptists, generally, espouse Republicanism.” Tellingly, Fristoe’s account made little reference to the established Church of England or religious liberty. Instead, in a much abridged summary of the imperial crisis, Fristoe chiefly cited the issue of taxation without representation, a political motive that resonated with all Americans, not just those concerned with religious freedom. Americanizing the Baptist cause, Fristoe exclaimed, “things being thus circumstanced, the Baptists took an active part with their fellow citizens in opposing British usurpation and aiming to secure our just rights which we deemed right then, and we have never retracted since.” Fristoe’s assertion that the Baptists joined with “their fellow citizens,” spoke directly to their desire to affirm their political legitimacy. Utilizing the republican rhetoric of the age, Fristoe exclaimed, government representatives legislated best when they knew “the sentiments of their constituents,” and “freedom of speech, and of the press” made possible the vocalization of those sentiments. Through the memorializing of the Baptists’ as fighters for civil liberty, Fristoe, like so many of his commemorating contemporaries, sought to claim a heritage for the Baptists based on their identity specifically as Americans.<sup>28</sup>

Only after explicitly detailing the ways in which the Baptists fit the American mold did Fristoe use his writing to assert the religiosity of the Baptists. According to Fristoe, “remembrance of the hardships and persecutions we endured under monarchical government and the oppressive measures exercised on us by that

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<sup>28</sup> Fristoe, *Ketocton Baptist*, Chapter 9 (no pagination).

government,” provided another reason to side with Republicanism. The establishment of the Anglican Church ran directly counter to the republican sentiments that the American revolutionaries touted. Though Fristoe did engage in the discussion of religious liberty, he focused much more heavily on tyranny exhibited by established churches and the monarchies they supported throughout history in general than the specific issues that plagued the Baptists in the mid to late eighteenth-century Virginia. Of the Republican government that existed in the United States in 1808, Fristoe again abstained from the topic of religious liberty, stressing instead, “the right of expressing our sentiments, wherein the national good is concerned, in petitioning to government for redress of grievances, and the repeated elections of men into the national councils that are avowed advocates of equal liberty.” That Fristoe chose to state his views on republican government in universal terms rather than terms that applied specifically to the Baptists indicates a political consciousness that superseded, or at the least side-stepped his religiosity. Fristoe emphasized civil over religious liberty, and in so doing, he wrote a history that greatly Americanized the Baptists’ Revolutionary participation.<sup>29</sup>

Fifty years after Fristoe, Howell further connected the message and purpose of the early Baptists with the political ideology of the nascent nation by contending, “yet another cause of their great success, was the consonance between Baptist doctrines, on political subjects, and the spirit of liberty which had now taken entire possession of the hearts of the people.” Baptist historians prior to Howell’s writing

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<sup>29</sup> Fristoe, *Ketocton Baptist*, Chapter 9 (no pagination).

commonly commemorated this sentiment, but by the 1850s, it was the very language of commemoration that dominated the message. By stating Baptist principles “had now taken entire possession of the hearts of the people,” Howell asserted Baptist ideology was not only compatible with the post-Revolutionary American republican ideals, it was the quintessence of them. What’s more, Howell contended, the Baptists were alone among other American Protestants in their advocating of “complete separation of church and state; perfect freedom of conscience and worship; and the right of every citizen to full and equal protection by the government in the exercise of all his privileges, social, political and religious.” These Baptist principles, in Howell’s telling, were originally “denounced as pestilential heresies, to be deplored, and if possible, destroyed.” However, eventually, as Howell maintained, due to the bold preaching and obstinate refusal to back down before persecution, Baptists were able to win over the populace. In Howell’s reflection, as the rhetoric of the Revolution spread throughout the colonies, the principles of liberty already espoused by the Baptists held such an influence on the patriot population, because “they [non-Baptists] saw plainly, the great truth, that no state that does not fully embrace them [principles of liberty], ever can be really free.” In sum, Howell asserted the Baptists led the charge toward revolution, and through their example, colonists once opposed to the Baptists not only saw the error of their ways, but decided instead to fight for their own liberties alongside the Baptists.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Howell, *Early Baptists of Virginia*, 40-1.

### Part Three: Commemorating Political Action and Claiming the First Amendment

If Baptist support of the Revolution provided commemorators ample opportunity to assert a claim to a national heritage, the Baptists' involvement in the ratification of the Constitution, and the passing of the First Amendment magnified that claim exponentially. The Baptists memorialized any and every instance they could find in their past of political action and participation when they wrote their histories. Examples of this range from the earliest petitions sent to the Virginia House of Burgesses before the Revolution, to the support of and eventual passing of the First Amendment, guaranteeing religious liberty in the new nation. In their commemorative writings, Baptists continually asserted the existence of a political consciousness among their forebears, and they believed that by providing evidence of such, they could better claim their American heritage. This section first analyzes the ways that the Baptists commemorated their contributions to Constitutional ratification and the passing of the first amendment, and then it traces the evolution of perceived collective political action through the use of petitions.

In addition to its commitment to commission the writing of a truly Baptist history, the General Committee's Goochland meeting of 1788 appears in reflective writings also for its decision to oppose the ratification of the Constitution. Several commemorators asserted the Baptists' determination to oppose ratification, led by John Leland, culminated in an historic meeting between Madison and he that echoed both in history books and traditional folklores for the following century.

Throughout the Revolutionary era, the nation debated the topic of religious liberty, and thanks to Jefferson's *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, which passed Virginia's General Assembly on January 16, 1786, Virginia led the charge. However, two years later, in the eyes of the Baptists, the proposed Constitution did not make sufficient assurances of civil liberties. Of primary concern to the Baptists at the General Committee, the Constitution, without a bill of rights did not prohibit the preferential treatment of any one religious group by the government, and thus threatened their religious freedom. Because of Leland's numerical support among the Baptists of Orange County, his candidacy for the Virginia Convention meant the possible rejection of the Constitution's ratification. Heavily invested in the Constitution, and determined to see it ratified, James Madison sought a meeting with Leland, his political opponent, in order to explain the Constitution's significance, and offer assurances of a future Bill of Rights that would protect religious liberty. Though the evidence of this encounter is debatable, commemorators asserted that at this meeting, Madison convinced Leland to both withdraw from the election and offer up his support for ratification.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>In describing the 1788 meeting, L. H. Butterfield exclaimed, that during the era of Constitutional ratification, "Virginia, a critical state by position, size, and prestige, stood delicately balanced between approval and disapproval," in *Elder John Leland, Jeffersonian Itinerant*, (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1952), 183; An explanatory discussion of Jefferson's Bill can be found in John Ragosta, "Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, July 2, 2014, [http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Virginia\\_Statute\\_for\\_Establishing\\_Religious\\_Freedom\\_1786](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Virginia_Statute_for_Establishing_Religious_Freedom_1786) (accessed May 13, 2015); summary and analysis of the meeting between Leland and Madison on the day before the election are given in W. B. Hackley, "If Madison Had Come to Dinner," *The Virginia Baptist Register*, No. 4, (1965), 185-192; Nathan O. Hatch contends, "Leland was one of the most popular and controversial Baptists in America. He was most famous as a protagonist of religious freedom. As a leader among Virginia Baptists in the 1780s, Leland had been influential in petitioning the legislature on behalf of Jefferson's bill for religious freedom and for the bill to end the incorporation of the Protestant Episcopal church." Of the meeting in question, Hatch states, "There is strong evidence that James Madison personally sought his [Leland's] support of the federal constitution, which Leland had first opposed," in

The memory of this event resonated through the years, enduring in a process of folklorization, wherein each successive generation strayed a bit further from historical evidence, and relied instead upon the dramatization of previous commemorators. In July, 1836, shortly after Madison's death, prominent Virginia statesman, John Barbour delivered a eulogy at Culpeper court house. Speaking of the monumental importance of Madison's connection to Leland, Barbour proclaimed that Madison's election to the Virginia ratifying convention "was brought about by his sudden return to the County on the eve of the election. His soft and assuasive and lucid elocution *changed two ministers* of the Gospel of the Baptist Church *on the day preceding the election*, and that conversion carried him into the convention. The celebrated *John Leland was one of them.*" Barbour then further emphasized the importance of this connection by stating, "I speak but the voice of faithful tradition, in saying that *these changes were decisive in the election.*"<sup>32</sup> The political significance attributed to Leland by a noted politician illustrated the resonating memory not only of Leland's crucial role within the Baptist community, but also of both his and the Baptists' political importance to the nation at large.

Several commemorators argued, without the support of Leland and the Baptists, the Constitution would not have been ratified. George Briggs, governor of

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*The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 95-96; Harvey asserted of the meeting, "The Baptists held the balance of power in Orange county, and the election of Mr. Madison to the convention depended on the withdrawal of Mr. Leleand from the race. Mr. Leleand declared in favor of Mr. Madison who was elected. The Federal Constitution, after a hard struggle, was ratified by a majority of 10. Mr. Madison was elected to Congress and, true to the faith and hopes of the Baptists, the amendment desired by the Baptists was offered by Mr. Madison January 8, 1789," in *Hickman*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Quotes from Barbour's eulogy of Madison taken from Hackley, "If Madison Had Come to Dinner," 187-88.

Massachusetts from 1844 to 1851, and confidante of Leland's, delivered a reflection of Barbour's eulogy of Madison to historian William Sprague for inclusion in his *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit*. Briggs claimed that he mentioned to Leland, Barbour's assertion that "if Madison had not been in the Virginia Convention, the Constitution would not have been ratified by that State; and, as the approval of nine States was required to give effect to this instrument, and as Virginia was the ninth State, if it had been rejected by her, the Constitution would have failed; and that it was by Elder Leland's influence that Madison was elected to that Convention." In Briggs' account, Leland responded by stating, "Barbour had given him too much credit; but he supposed he knew to what he referred." Briggs recalled that Leland explained the nature of the ratification debate in Virginia prior to the convention, and that he at the time sided with Patrick Henry and the party opposed to ratification because they believed, should the Constitution go into effect without amendments securing civil liberties, particularly religious freedom, "the hopes of constitutional liberty and a confederated and free Republic would be lost." Leland, the oppositional candidate for Orange County stood directly between his opponent, Madison and ratification. In Briggs' telling, Leland confirmed meeting Madison the day before the election, and after "Mr. Madison spent half a day with him, and fully and unreservedly communicated to him his opinions upon the great matters which were then agitating the people of the State and the Confederacy," Leland, the following day "went in for Mr. Madison; and he was elected without difficulty." Briggs named Leland, "a noble Christian Patriot," and asserted, "that single act, with the motives which prompted it, and the consequences which followed it, entitled

him to the respect of mankind.” In Briggs’ opinion, the humble Leland saw the logic of Madison’s views, though no detail is provided of the conversation, nor of Leland’s reasoning for dropping out of the election. The memory of the event, however, secured for Leland a position of prominence not only in Baptist history, but debatably in America’s national heritage as well.<sup>33</sup>

That legendary meeting was further embellished in the history of Leland’s hometown of Cheshire, Massachusetts, published in 1885. This account claimed that Madison, upon realizing the influential John Leland opposed ratification, stated, “then I am beaten.” According to this myth, a friend of Madison’s urged him to meet with Leland because he certainly would be defeated without Leland’s convincing. To Madison, this friend contended of Leland, that “he will go to the polls with his commanding form and mysterious power, and the rank and file of his counties will follow him in an unwavering line; no power will avail to win one of them. They will watch Leland, and the vote he casts will be the one that they will cast.” The tale continued by detailing the actual meeting of the two legends, who “sat down upon a grassy knoll beneath a shading tree, and talked on. The sun went down the western slopes—and still they talked.” In this account, after arduous hours of intelligent discussion, Leland declared his mind was changed, to which Madison replied while shaking Leland’s outreached hand, “then...I’m elected.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Briggs’ account of Leland’s meeting with Madison is transcribed by William Buell Sprague in *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit; or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished Clergymen of the Baptist Denomination in the United States, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), 178-180.

<sup>34</sup> Quotes taken from Raynor and Peticlere, *Hist. of Cheshire, 186-7* in Leland, *Jeffersonian Itinerant*, 189-90.

Illustrating the resonating power of this meeting, reflective nationalist writers who emphatically disagreed with the significance commonly attributed to Leland in American Constitutional history felt compelled to declare their opposition. *A History of Orange County, Virginia*, penned by W. W. Scott in 1907, provided a skeptical counter-rendition of the tale. Scott referred to the meeting between Madison and Leland as “a local tradition...at a famous spring near Nason’s. A fine oak tree, still standing near the spring, is known locally as ‘Madison’s Oak.’” Dismissing the reliability of this “tradition,” Scott asserted, “as neither the ‘Life’ of Leland, nor the sketch of him in Sprague’s ‘American Pulpit,’ makes any mention of this discussion, the incident is believed to be wholly apocryphal.” Scott stated this, despite the fact that Sprague did make mention of the Madison-Leland meeting by way of Briggs’ letter. Regardless, Scott’s interpretation of the myth appears to have sought specifically to hedge the Baptists’ place in the discussion of national heritage. In any case, the story of Leland’s meeting with Madison did resonate through multiple generations and among commemorators of both Baptist, as well as American history. Even despite criticisms by commemorators such as Scott, the very mention of Leland in a nationalist context illustrated the success of the Baptists in Americanizing their identity.<sup>35</sup>

Commemorators often trace the political consciousness that Leland reflected upon in the early nineteenth century all the way back to the 1770s. As evidence, these writers commonly referred to the many petitions and lobbyists that Baptists

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<sup>35</sup> W. W. Scott, *A History of Orange County, Virginia, From Its Formation in 1734 to the End of Reconstruction in 1870* (Richmond, VA: Everett Waddy Co., 1907), 240-41.

sent to political assemblies throughout their early history. Virginia Baptists sent their first petition seeking governmental redress on May 26, 1770, when they “sought relief from the House of Burgesses for the restrictions imposed on them.” Those restrictions included the requirement of Baptist ministers, considered laymen by the Anglican establishment, to “bear arms and attend drills which interfered with their ministerial duties,” particularly on Sabbath, as well as the banning of “ministers from preaching in meeting houses not named in their licenses,” which directly interfered with the itinerant nature of the Baptist ministry. Further fueling the fire of reflective memorialists, Virginia Baptists continued to petition the House of Burgesses into 1775, when the impending Revolutionary War gave them another avenue for their political goals. On August 12, 1775, Virginia Baptists redirected their petitioning from the British government to colonial meetings. The Baptists organized again, and realizing the weight of their collective numbers began to push for “religious freedom and the separation of church and state.” At this meeting, Virginia Baptists resolved “to circulate petitions to the Virginia Convention or General Assembly, throughout the state, in order to obtain signatures.” Semple reflected on these early petitions by stating, “It was in making these attempts that they were so fortunate as to interest in their behalf the celebrated Patrick Henry. Being always the friend of liberty, he only needed to be informed of their oppression, when, without hesitation, he stepped forward to their relief.” This tactic of gathering support by way of petitions became the chief political weapon of choice for the Baptists. Referring to the strategy of petitioning, reflective writers

emphasized the Baptists' ability to bolster their political clout with the signatures of sympathetic non-Baptists.<sup>36</sup>

Baptist commemorators interpreted the willingness of non-Baptists to sign petitions as one piece of evidence that Baptist principles were not only compatible with, but influential to the republican ideology espoused by the Revolution. In his reflective history, David Benedict stated, "we are not to understand, that this important ecclesiastical revolution was effected wholly by the Baptists; it is true, they were the most active, but they were joined by other dissenters; neither was the whole dissenting interest united, at that time, equal to the accomplishment of such a revolution; but we must turn our eyes to the political state of the country, to find adequate causes for such a change." Benedict conflated the political cause of the Revolution with the Baptist cause for religious freedom by stating, "republican principles had gained much ground, and were fast advancing to superiority; the leading men on that side, viewed the established clergy and the established religion as inseparable appendages of Monarchy, one of the pillars by which it was supported." In such a reading, the Baptists, whose battle with the religious establishment of Virginia predated the Revolution served as ideal inspiration to American patriots. According to Benedict, the republican ideals that colonists called upon aligned perfectly with the principles of the Baptists, who "were republicans from interest, as well as principle." In the mind of commemorators such as

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<sup>36</sup> Discussion and analysis of Baptist petition strategies and practices can be found in John S. Moore, "Virginia Baptist Petitions for Religious Liberty, 1770-1798," *The Virginia Baptist Register*, No. 25 (1986); quote concerning the account of the meeting on August 12, 1775 is taken from Semple, *Rise and Progress*, 41, 62.

Benedict, Baptists succeeded in garnering support for their petitions specifically because of the compatibility of Baptists' principles with Revolutionary ideologies.<sup>37</sup>

#### Part Four: Later Commemorations, a Response to Moral Declension, and a Defense of Baptist Nationalism

Though reflective writers celebrated the conflation of Baptist principles and republican ideology throughout the nineteenth century, many Baptist leaders assessed the state of the church and the nation, and considered religiosity to be in decline. Several writers reflectively attributed the Baptists' interest in the social and political governing of the new nation as a key contributor to this perceived declension. But if nationalism indicated declension to many reflective Baptists, that perceived declension, conversely indicated the existence of a Baptist nationalism, at least among those who sought to define themselves as American through the writing of Baptist history. This section first illustrates the ways that Baptist commemorators emulated early nationalist histories in order to assert their American heritage. This section then utilizes the reflective lamentations by Baptist commemorators of religious declension brought on by political participation to evidence the existence of Baptist nationalism.

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<sup>37</sup> Benedict, *History of the Baptist Denomination*, 77.

The writing of Revolutionary histories as an act of early American nationalism on a large scale is evident in a number of instances, but it is superbly exemplified by the writings of Revolutionary patriot, Edmund Randolph, who, in 1809 recalled the spirit of nationalism as existing before even the invention of the United States as a nation. Randolph pointedly penned his history of Virginia in a manner that bespoke an early American national identity. Randolph exclaimed, that colonial Virginia, “from the charters, the English laws, the English constitution, [and] English theories,” developed a spirit that, “at that time, had diminished her almost idolatrous deference to the mother country, and taught her to begin to think for herself.” According to Randolph, the spirit of independence in Virginia arose out of the very structures that governed it, such as the established Anglican Church. Reflecting on Virginia’s colonial past, especially in relation to the perceived oppression that sparked the Revolution, Randolph drew upon circulated colonial literature as evidence of a “public mind” that “had daily received fresh excitement from brooding over the causes of discontent.” Randolph described a public atmosphere in Virginia, ripe with republican sentiments, wherein “an attribute of character in a government, readily diffused itself among the individuals who were members of it.” The prerevolutionary Virginia that Randolph described insinuated a unity of purpose and ideology across social lines in a way that created a revolutionary character that later commemorators, in the era of the early republic could call upon as the source and heritage of national identity. Baptists traced their

American heritage to that very character as they wrote their histories in much the same fashion as Randolph.<sup>38</sup>

In their commemorations, Baptists, like many other groups asserted their claim to America's national heritage in public arenas in order to influence public opinion. In December, 1791, the National Gazette published an article penned by James Madison entitled *Public Opinion*. In this article, Madison contended that, "public opinion sets bounds to every government, and is the real sovereign in every free one. As there are cases where the public opinion must be obeyed by the government; so there are cases, where not being fixed, it may be influenced by the government." Madison's contention on public opinion concisely summed up the arena in which the idea of nationalism came into being, the very arena that Baptist commemorators capitalized on. Despite the necessarily malleable nature of opinion as a concept, the very notion of it as something that was able to influence government action or policy suggests opinion existed also as something very tangible. As the nation grew in size, so too did the arena of public discourse. The larger the arena of discourse, the greater the fracture of opinions. Accordingly, Madison argued, "the larger a country, the less easy for its real opinion to be ascertained, and the less difficult to be counterfeited; when ascertained or presumed, the more respectable it is in the eyes of individuals."<sup>39</sup> So it was that as the nation grew, religious sects such as the Baptists found increased public

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<sup>38</sup> Randolph, "Edmund Randolph's Essay," 115-17.

<sup>39</sup> James Madison, "Public Opinion," *James Madison: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1999), 500-1.

legitimization as they institutionalized into denominations. Such a respectability in the public opinion suggested a compromise of religious purity of doctrine, but also evidenced for Baptist commemorators a greater claim to the nation's heritage.

In defense of Baptist nationalism, several ministers took to the pulpit to exclaim the duty of their congregations to participate in American politics. Leland, in a Fast-Day sermon delivered on April 9, 1801, took the opportunity to reflect upon both the proliferation of the Baptist denomination over the course of the previous half-century, as well as the political state of the union over its twenty-six year history. He closed his sermon by asserting his listeners had much to be thankful for, primarily because "a vast empire, of sixteen United States, has risen out of a number of feeble, depressed colonies." However, engaging indirectly in the famous partisan battle of the early republic, which pitted Republicans versus Federalists, Leland warned, cause for concern did exist. He stated of the Federalists, "the lust of power and importance! Designs to screen men and measures from public animadversion; forsaking the good old simple maxims of republicanism, and adopting the maxims of monarchical courts, have crept into our councils." Although, according to Leland, enemies of the spirit of republicanism had managed to penetrate the nation's offices while "the genius of America has been slumbering and sleeping," hope still existed for the triumph of the Republicans. Leland exclaimed, "this assertion of the American genius, has brought forth the *Man of the People* [Jefferson], the defender of the rights of man and the rights of conscience to fill the chair of state." Leland made no effort to hide his political consciousness. Rather, he used his pulpit to further Americanize the Baptist cause. Of his adoration for

Jefferson, Leland stated emphatically, “pardon me, my hearers, if I am over-warm. I lived in Virginia fourteen years. The beneficent influence of my hero was too generally felt to leave me a stoic.” Eventually, reflective Baptist writers bestowed upon Leland a very similar level of memorialization to that which he delivered upon Jefferson.<sup>40</sup>

While many Baptist commemorators interpreted the Revolutionary participation of their forebears as direct evidence of a legitimate claim to the American national identity, some saw in the Baptists’ history evidence that political participation directly correlated with a declension in religiosity. The degree that a commemorator either celebrated or lamented the Baptists’ role in the Revolution tended to change over time. During and directly following the Revolution, perceptions of declension seemed nowhere near as prominent as they became in the 1830s to 1850s. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, celebrations of Baptist nationalism again proliferated the commemorative literature. Semple, in 1809 reflected on evidence of declension that he found in the minutes of the General Association’s meeting in August of 1776. According to Semple, “they met accordingly, and letters from seventy-four churches were received, bringing mournful tidings of coldness and declension. This declension is accounted for, by some of the letters, as arising from too much concern in political matters, being about the commencement of the revolution.” These two lines are all that appear in Semple’s text on this particular subject of declension. From here, Semple’s history

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<sup>40</sup> Leland, *Writings*, 255.

turned to focus on the various ways that the Baptists engaged in the politics of the Revolution, specifically on the several petitions that the association sent to the Virginia Convention in response to “the civil grievances of the Baptists.” In this context, Semple’s recording of a perceived declension provides more evidence of the nationalist mentality of the reflective Baptists. That Semple found evidence of a perceived declension caused by “too much concern in political matters,” and chose instead to dedicate his text to the commemoration of Baptists’ political participation speaks to the overarching arena of Baptist nationalism in which Semple’s writing appeared.<sup>41</sup>

While proponents of Baptist nationalism in the early nineteenth century conflated their victory in the battle for religious liberty with other political freedoms won in the Revolution, several also reflectively warned that such a victory for Baptists as Americans should not devalue God’s contribution. Echoing Semple, and in many cases quoting him directly, Benedict in 1813 described post-Revolutionary America specifically as a scene of decreased piety. According to Benedict, “the war, though very propitious to the liberty of the Baptists, had an opposite effect upon the life of religion among them. As if persecution were more favourable to vital piety than unrestrained liberty, they seem to have abated in their zeal, upon being unshackled from their manacles.” The idea behind this statement resonated deeply among many Baptist authors, as the memorializing of prerevolutionary ministers, who exhibited true faithfulness in the face of persecution and imprisonment left an

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<sup>41</sup> Semple, *History of Virginia Baptists*, 62-65.

unattainable level of piousness for post-Revolutionary Baptists to follow. Benedict, by speculating that perhaps “many did not rightly estimate the true source of liberty, nor ascribe its attainment to the proper arm,” warned his Baptist brethren of the danger of choosing politics over piety. Benedict suggested such an interpretation desacralized the contributions of the ministers who suffered in prisons merely for the sake of worshipping God in the manner they believed most holy. Also seen as contributing to the general decline of religiosity following the Revolution, Benedict argued against the accumulation of wealth. Benedict exclaimed, “nothing is more common, than for the increase of riches to produce a decrease of piety.” Benedict’s lamentations of a declension in piety is indicative of a viewpoint shared by many in the early nineteenth century that Baptists’ religiosity declined as they progressively identified as patriotic Americans.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Benedict, *History of the Baptist Denomination*, 89-90; Much of Benedict’s material can be traced directly back to Semple’s writing, which was published three years earlier. Of a perceived declension of religiosity, Semple noted that as Baptists’ “respectability increased the preachers and their hearers found a relish for stronger meat, which, to a proper extent, was very suitable; but it too often happened, in indulging this, that party spirit and even vanity had too much influence...Practical piety was, in many places, too little urged,” in Semple, *Rise and Progress of the Baptists*, 59-60; What most concerned post-Revolutionary religious leaders was how the republican principles of the Revolution empowered Americans as both individuals and as laypersons. Jon Butler perceived this post-Revolutionary religious declension by stating, “the destruction of church buildings, the interruption of denominational organization, the occasional decline in congregations and membership, the shattering of the Anglican church, and the rise of secular pride in revolutionary accomplishments all weighed on American religious leaders.” Butler contends various contemporary religious leaders, most especially “Baptists like John Leland and Isaac Backus all equated republican longevity with widely inculcated moral virtue.” This moral virtue needed to be emphasized and transmitted via the same competitive public communication networks that transmitted those republican values that seemed antecedent to traditional modes of morality. In order to compete with secular individuality and governmental empowerment, religion, devoid of any compulsive authority after disestablishment needed to adapt to the rhetorical dynamism that permeated the arena of public opinion. In doing so, America’s various mainstream denominations such as the Baptists found themselves compromising their religiosity for public respectability and the influence that accompanied it, in Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 213-14.

As the nineteenth century advanced, and the arena of American nationalism evolved, so too did Baptists' efforts to prove their heritage. The partisan battles of the early nineteenth century left America's political arena wrought with questions concerning the governing of morality in the young nation, and it was in this context that John Leland, one of the most politically active of the Baptist leaders, began to lament the religious declension he perceived in the nation around him. In Leland's opinion, with "the declaration of independence, and the establishment of a republican form of government, it is not to be wondered at that the Baptists so heartily and uniformly engaged in the cause of the country against the king." After all, the monumental change in government promised the religious freedom that Baptists had so fervently sought for decades. The transposing of American republican values with Baptist political principles; including "religious liberty, and a freedom from ministerial tax" seemed a perfect marriage. However, upon reflection, Leland noted that though Baptists were far from "disappointed in their expectations... as they gained this piece of freedom, so the cares of war, the spirit of trade, and moving to the western waters, seemed to bring on a general declension."<sup>43</sup> The process of maturation into a mainstream American Christian denomination brought with it the religious compromises that troubled devout ministers like Leland. Such a declension in the Baptist Church, Leland asserted, caused "many of the ministers [to remove] from their churches, to Kentucky, and left their scattered flocks, like a cottage in the vineyard, like a lodge in a garden of

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<sup>43</sup> Leland, *Writings*, 104.

cucumbers.” The Baptists lamented that what they gained in public and political influence, came at the cost of their religiosity.<sup>44</sup>

Perceptions of declension aside, many Baptist writers still maintained their growing influence on secular society and politics specifically in the early republic. However, secular society influenced the Baptists as well. Benedict remarked of a general revival of religion that took place from 1785 to 1791, asserting that churches of various denominations enjoyed growth in membership during those years. While the Baptists of colonial Virginia maintained a reputation of unorthodox preaching, unlearned clergy, enthusiastic conversions, and loud awkward congregations, Benedict exclaimed of the post-Revolutionary Virginia Baptists, “their zeal was less mixed with enthusiasm, and their piety became more rational. They were much more numerous, and of course, in the eyes of the world more respectable.” This level of respectability specifically illustrated the Baptists’ willingness to conform to American society, and also corresponded with perceived declension. Benedict noted that because of the rise in the Baptists’ numbers, especially with the additions of “persons of much greater weight in civil society,” the Baptists could not maintain as they had prior to the Revolution. The body of the church, consisting of a larger, wholly different set of opinions and influences “could not but influence their manners and spirit more or less.” In other words, the Baptists proliferated in American society, they enjoyed a heightened level of political influence and respectability, and they became increasingly accepted as

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<sup>44</sup> Leland, *Writings*, 105-6.

rightful heirs to the true national heritage, but this all evidenced the degeneration of the prerevolutionary piety that Baptists celebrated throughout their history.<sup>45</sup>

Memorializing writers of various affiliations who sought to assert for themselves a claim to America's national heritage commonly commemorated the Revolution, the nation's founding fathers, the ratification of the Constitution, and the early debates of the first political parties. Baptist writers also commemorated these things, but they did so by conflating them with specifically Baptist values and events. By the turn of the twentieth century, the memorializing efforts of the Baptists had evolved into a form of folklorization much akin to the tale of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree.<sup>46</sup> Reflecting in 1900, William Taylor Thom opened his book, *The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Virginia: The Baptists* with a quote from George Washington's letter of 1789 to the Baptists, which stated, "I recollect with satisfaction that the religious society of which you are members have been, throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously, the firm friends to civil liberty, and the preserving promoters of our glorious revolution." Thom followed this pivotal quote by clearly conflating the Baptists' cause with the Revolution when he stated, "the struggle for Religious Freedom in Virginia was really a part of that greater struggle for political freedom with which it was so nearly coincident in time. Much the same causes led to each; the logic of both was the same; and there was no

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<sup>45</sup> Benedict, *History of the Baptist Denomination*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Eve Kornfeld illustrates the irony of instructing "America's youths in integrity through fiction," when she discusses Mason Locke Weems' addition of the story in the fifth edition of *The Life of George Washington; With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself and Exemplary to his Young Countrymen* in 1806. Kornfeld asserts the folklorization of George Washington exemplified the nationalist approach to creating an early American identity in *Creating an American Culture*, 48-50.

time at which the religious struggle was not largely political and not clearly seen to be so by the leaders of thought.”<sup>47</sup> Thom interpreted Washington’s acknowledgment of the Baptists efforts toward religious freedom as a defining affirmation that the Baptists’ represented the very ideal of the American patriot. Almost echoing Thom, W. P. Harvey asserted, “alone Baptists could not have done all credited to them. We had powerful friends, e.g.: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Patrick Henry, Gen. Washington and myriads of sympathizers in the struggle, and above all, God. Baptists were the pioneers—the agitators—the consistent forerunners.” In essence, twentieth-century reflective Baptists not only saw their Revolutionary American heritage as indisputable, they evidenced it by asserting their forebears exerted a critical influence over the nation’s most prominently celebrated founders. Few things could be declared more patriotic.<sup>48</sup>

In his preface to *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia*, penned in 1910, Charles Fenton James expressed a desire to revise the historiography, which had “at various times and on various occasions a disposition to rewrite the history of that struggle, and to rob our Baptist fathers of the peculiar honor which has ever been claimed for them—that of being the foremost, most zealous, and most consistent and unwavering champions of liberty.”<sup>49</sup> Referring to revisionists’ claims to correct “Baptist brag” as inaccurate and in need of revision itself, James, like his twentieth-century peers celebrated the common conflation of

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<sup>47</sup> Thom, *Struggle for Religious Freedom*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Thom, *Struggle for Religious Freedom*, 21; Harvey, *Hickman*, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Fenton James, *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell Company, 1900), 7.

Baptist nationalism. Stating, “Baptists were the first and only religious denomination that struck for independence from Great Britain, and the first and only that made a move for religious liberty before independence was declared,” James placed the Baptists on a patriotic level higher than any of their denominational peers. Arguing, “the Baptists were the only denomination of Christians that expressed any dissatisfaction with the Constitution of the United States on the ground that it did not provide sufficient security for religious liberty, and the only one that asked that it be so amended as to leave no room for doubt or fear,” James pronounced the existence of both the Baptists’ political consciousness, as well as their political influence. Claiming to write for posterity, James stressed the importance of his work of revisionism as furnishing “the careful and painstaking student of history a reliable text-book for the study of one of the most important of the great battles that have been fought for human rights and have marked the progress of the human race.” James attributed to the Baptists an importance that clearly existed outside of their religious history. Like many other commemorators, James perpetuated the patriotic legend that the Baptists had come to exclaim as truth.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Fenton James, *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell Company, 1900), 8, 197.

## Conclusion

In astonishing irony, John Leland, one of the most influential Baptist leaders in the era of the early republic, fought fervently for a complete and absolute religious liberty, and in doing so, he engaged deeply in the public arena of early American political discourse. Like other Baptists who at first merely sought religious freedom, Leland developed a truly political consciousness, which he then shared with his fellow Baptists through his sermons, his petitions, and afterwards through his reflective writings. As was the case with Leland's contemporaries, both political and religious, his ability to write his own history proved one of his mightiest weapons. By the end of his life, Leland found himself celebrated in political reflections as well as in Baptist histories. In Semple's commemorative account, "Mr. Leland, as a preacher, was probably the most popular of any that ever resided in this state. He is unquestionably a man of fertile genius." Leland adeptly represented the Baptists in their ability to both lead through religiosity, and influence through reflective writing. However, Semple also stated of Leland, that "while in Virginia, he wrote several treatises, and was certainly very instrumental in effecting the just and salutary regulations concerning religion, in this state. He has been similarly employed since his removal to New England. He has always been a zealous advocate for republican government." Leland, like his fellow Baptists of the early republic, navigated the waters of public opinion in an era where participation in political discourse allowed for direct claims to the newly minted national identity.

Behind the leadership of “Christian Patriot[s]” such as Leland, the Baptists were able to leave their indelible mark in the annals of both America’s religious history and the history of the nation at large. This the Baptists accomplished through the tactic of historical commemoration that placed Baptist leaders like John Leland squarely in the discourse of America’s national heritage with the likes of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, Baptists engaged directly in public assertions of legitimacy by claiming national heritage in their memorialized histories. By the twentieth century, histories penned by the Baptists depended not only on the first-hand accounts left by their forebears, but on a Baptist nationalist folklore that had evolved over a hundred years of commemorative writing. The nationalist battles of the nineteenth century secured a place in politics for religion, but religion first had to submit to political terms. With the official legal separation of religion from government, first in Virginia, and later in all of America, various religious sects found themselves in a predicament; no governmental compulsion existed for religious worship or allegiance. Religious bodies were free to govern themselves and their own members in whichever way they chose, but too their members were free to leave their church should they wish. With such a void of religious compulsion, religious bodies commonly turned to political participation and assertions of nationalism in order to maintain their relevance in American society. By doing so, religious bodies such as the Baptists competed in the claiming

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<sup>51</sup> Semple, *Rise and Progress*, 158-9; Sprague, *American Baptist Pulpit*, 180.

of authority over the moral governance of the nation and its states.<sup>52</sup> In such an environment, denominations such as the Baptists found political reason to relax their standards of religious purity in order to better gain a foothold in the burgeoning arena of American politics. In this context of ideological contestation, the Baptists expressed their sense of American heritage through the memorializing of their prerevolutionary/Revolutionary contributions to America's patriotic ideology. The Baptists became nationalists.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This environment of contestation is also adeptly described by Chris Beneke in *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Essentially, Beneke argues, the social process that resulted in religious liberty in America was directed by the inherited rhetoric of revolutionary ideology that inundated America's public discourse. The very public nature of the arena of religious discourse that Beneke describes fit squarely into the growing public sphere of American politics. Once religion was legally disestablished, it was clearly open for public debate. As religion was typically used for the moral governance of actions within a society, the legal absence of it in America left a void that could only be filled by rhetorical mores. As Americans increasingly fought for political advantage, religion was frequently coopted as political ideology. In such an environment, Beneke contends, varying religious sects and denominations benefited politically from unifying under the ecumenical banner of shared religious fundamentals.

<sup>53</sup> Beneke argues, Americans in the nineteenth century "understood the practical value of tying one's religious identity to one's American identity and giving both precedence above all others." In order to do so, Beneke contends, Americans needed to find a way for religion to maintain a sacred, almost untouchable presence within a world of politics where all things were generally open to criticism. The result, according to Beneke was a "realm of things spiritual [where] Americans had learned to value fundamentals above particulars, to change affiliations without condemning the affiliations of others, to speak loudly but censure mildly," or in other words a place where being an American was based on a set of untouchable mores that all could agree upon, and though each person's specific religious beliefs or practices could vary slightly, the fundamental protestant identity they all shared (for those who shared it) placed religious belief outside the realm of criticism, in *Beyond Toleration*, 222-225.

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## Curriculum Vita

### **Education**

**PhD Candidate, History: Michigan State University** **2015-Present**  
Major Field: United States: Early National Period  
Minor Fields: Borderlands, Anthropology: Native American Studies  
Committee: TBD

**Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA** **2013-2015**  
College of Arts and Science  
Graduate Studies  
Major, History  
**Major GPA: 3.71**  
**Cumulative GPA: 3.71**  
**Projected Graduation Date: August, 2015**

**Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI** **2003-2013**  
College of Arts and Science  
Departmental Honors  
Major, History  
**Major GPA: 3.84**  
**Cumulative GPA: 3.65**

### **Research Grants and Awards**

Research Assistantship through Office of Provost 2015  
Awarded for data accumulation research to aid in a study on gubernatorial  
campaign finance and expenditures

Laurence Henry Gipson Research Grant (Lehigh University) 2015  
Awarded for research expenses and travel for Thesis project

Departmental Scholarship (Lehigh University) –3 Graduate Credits 2015

Research Fellowship from Lehigh University Mountaintop Initiative  
Summer 2014  
Coordinated Research Team in Project to Document History of Racial  
Tension at Lehigh  
Produced a Documentary Film and Constructed a Multimedia Website for  
Presentation of Research

Departmental Scholarship (Lehigh University) – 9 Graduate Credits 2015

Departmental Scholarship (Lehigh University) – 6 Graduate Credits 2014

Undergraduate Research Stimulus Program (Eastern Michigan University)  
Summer 2011  
Awarded for research expenses and merit for  
proposed Honors Thesis project

George R. York Scholarship Award (Eastern Michigan University) 2011

Recognition of Excellence (Eastern Michigan University) 2011

Undergraduate Honors Assistantship (Eastern Michigan University) 2011  
Recognition of Excellence (Eastern Michigan University) 2012

### **Memberships**

Phi Alpha Theta (Eastern Michigan University) 2011-13

### **Research Experience**

Masters Thesis

*Revolutionary Reverends: The Politics of Memory and Identity in the Baptist Church of post-Revolutionary Virginia*

Documentary on Racial Tension at Lehigh

*Engineering Equality: The Evolution of the Black Student Experience at Lehigh University*

Website Associated with Documentary Project

<http://engineeringequality.cas2.lehigh.edu>

Documentary on First Black Legacy at Lehigh University

*Spirit of Legacy: Safiya Jafari Simmons, Linda Washington Jafari, Ralph Thomas and the First Black Legacy at Lehigh University*

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

*As far as the laws of Great Britain Permit: The Effect of British Imperialism on French Canada, and its Impact on the American Revolution.*

Independent Study

For researching and writing of Honors Thesis

### **Presentations**

“Revolutionary Reverends: Anxiety, Identity, and the Commemoration of the Baptist Church in Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Virginia,” Presented at Lehigh University Department of History Fall Semester Colloquium Series, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (November 20, 2014)

“Out of the Shadows: A Prelude to Engineering Equality,” Documentary Film Shown at Lehigh University Black and Latino Alumni Network for Community and Equity Banquet Celebrating Lehigh’s Sesquicentennial, New York City, New York (November 20, 2014)

“In Regards to the War in the North: Quebec and the American Revolution,” Thirty-second Annual Eastern Michigan University Undergraduate Symposium, Ypsilanti, Michigan (March 30, 2012)

“Food for the Taking: The Impact of Agriculture and Food Production on the French and Indian War,” Thirtieth Annual Eastern Michigan University Undergraduate Symposium, Ypsilanti, Michigan (March 26, 2010)

## **Foreign Language**

French (intermediate level)

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