Revival and Revolution: The Political Social and Religious Role of Colonial Virginia's New Light Presbyterians

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ABSTRACT

REVIVAL AND REVOLUTION: THE POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS ROLE OF COLONIAL VIRGINIA’S NEW LIGHT PRESBYTERIANS

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Old Dominion University, 2009
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Throughout historical scholarship and popular memory, Presbyterians have been considered one of the more radical elements in the colonial American population because of ethnic background, theological ideas relating to the Scottish Enlightenment, and dissenting Protestants’ position in opposition to Church-State structures. This study will examine the political theories, activities, and results of the New Light Presbyterians in Virginia’s Tidewater and Piedmont regions between 1740 and 1780.

Chapter I describes trends in the historiographical literature of the Great Awakening, religion and the American Revolution, and more specifically, the politics of Presbyterianism in colonial Virginia, in addition to outlining the origins of the revivals which resulted in the formation of the Hanover Presbytery and defining their status as dissenters against Virginia’s established religion, the Church of England. Chapter II examines the early leaders of the Hanover Presbyterians, especially the Reverend Samuel Davies, and the extent to which their lobbying for religious toleration presented a challenge to the authority of local ruling elite and British royal officials. Chapter III discusses the reaction of the Hanover Presbytery to the independence movement and the role those dissenters played in the process of separating church from state in newly independent Virginia.
This study concludes that, although Presbyterians in the eastern part of colonial Virginia actively campaigned for religious toleration, they stopped short of demanding full religious liberty until repeated Baptist petitions and radical republican activists ensured its passage. Rather than challenging Virginia’s dominant social, religious, and political structures and acting as an early call for independence from British rule, these Presbyterians continually reinforced the authority of local legislative and judicial bodies, the Crown, and the Church of England.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Much has been made of Presbyterian contributions to the American Revolution, and, indeed, some Presbyterians were among the first to call for American independence. For example, in 1743, Alexander Creaghead, a member of the radical Presbytery of New Brunswick and active in Virginia and North Carolina, published a paper discussing the Scottish Presbyterian tenet of covenants in government and their violation by the Stuarts and Hanoverians. He declared himself absolved of his allegiance to those monarchs, including the current sovereign, George II. In words echoed decades later in the language of the Declaration of Independence, he conjured the memory of the rebellion against “that cruel tyrant Charles the Second” and “our drawing the Sword, is to testify to the World...that we are to this Day willing to maintain the same defensive War...altho the Defense of [our religion] should cost us our Lives or any thing that is most dear to us.”

Although this pamphlet was fiercely denounced by the New Brunswick Presbytery as seditious and opposed to the principles of Presbyterianism, it was widely circulated among Presbyterians in North America, and Virginia Presbyterian communities must have been aware of its contents and of its denunciation. Although operating outside the norms of Presbyterian political involvement, Creaghead and a few

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This paper follows the format requirements of *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* 6th edition by Kate L. Turabian.

1 Alexander Creaghead, *Renewal of the Covenants, National and Solemn League; A Confession of Sins; An Engagement to Duties; and a Testimony: as they were carried on at Middle Octorara in Pennsylvania, November 11, 1743* (Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin, 1743), xxxii.

other Presbyterians were among the first Americans to vocalize open hostility toward the British government, leading some historians to argue that “The first voice publicly raised in America to dissolve all connection with Great Britain came not from the Puritans of New England, nor the Dutch of New York, nor the planters of Virginia, but from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.”3

As Creaghead and his radical allies demonstrated, principles of the Scottish Enlightenment were at the heart of any Presbyterian resistance to British rule. Especially significant to scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment was the doctrine of contractual government, and to some extent “Revolutionary impulse was founded on seventeenth-century doctrines of the Covenant and on their belief in a divine law and constitution which no human law or human ruler could rightfully violate.”4 These ideas were especially pervasive from 1759 until the outbreak of the Revolution, during which time the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), which educated nearly all the itinerant and resident ministers active in Virginia in the final years before the Revolution, was under the presidency of Samuel Davies and then John Witherspoon. Under Davies, an emerging tradition emphasized intense debates on theological, philosophical, and to a lesser extent, political topics.

Witherspoon, on the other hand, continued the debates and infused intense philosophical scholarship with current political issues and revolutionary thought.5 For example, Witherspoon’s lectures heavily incorporated the Scottish Enlightenment

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4 Baldwin, 53.

5 Baldwin, 61.
principle of government deriving its legitimacy from covenant with a body of believers.

He asserted that all government required an active agreement which implied

the consent of every individual to live in, and be a member of that society, a consent to some particular plan of government, [and] a mutual agreement between the subjects and rulers; of subjection on the one hand, of protection on the other—These are all implied in the union of every society and they compleat the whole...Have then all subjects a right when they see fit, to remove from the society in which they are?6

Furthermore, during a 1770 commencement debate, Princeton students under Witherspoon’s guidance debated whether “All men, by the law of nature are free.”7

Both Witherspoon and Creaghead applied their religious background and spiritual experiences to create political implications for their ministries. Creaghead’s outspoken rejection of British rule and Witherspoon’s intellectual leadership of Princeton’s revolutionary generation have been hailed as examples of American Presbyterianism’s leadership in the rise of radicalism and discord which erupted in revolt. However, this interpretation does not take into account the complex political, social, and religious dynamics of America’s movement toward revolution. By the 1770s, Princeton educated the sons of political elites from across the colonies rather than remaining singularly focused on producing Presbyterian clergy to serve scattered congregations. Similarly, Creaghead’s incendiary publication was rejected by the mainstream body of Presbyterians and he faced restrictions on his political activism as his ministry in Virginia was brought under the authority of the Presbytery of New Brunswick.


In Virginia, distinctive political, social, and religious landscapes created an intricate system of hierarchy, privilege, and deference which challenges the popular image of Presbyterians as leaders of the radical revolutionary movement. The establishment of the Church of England as the state religion created problems for Presbyterians. Supported through the collection of taxes and mandated through the imposition of fines for non-attendance, the Anglican Church was the sole religious entity permitted to perform baptisms and marriages, essentially making all Virginians dependent upon Anglican forms of worship and governance. Beginning in the 1740s, the Great Awakening spread religious revival throughout the Atlantic world, as passionate Methodist preachers such as George Whitefield traveled through the colonies encouraging a more emotional, spiritual, and spontaneous religious experience that clashed with Anglican concepts of order and structure. Whitefield, who visited Virginia in 1739, sparked an awakening there which resulted in the formation of a dissenting Presbyterian group in Hanover county. By the outbreak of the Revolution, the revival movement and the body of dissenters were deeply entrenched in Hanover county and had spread to other areas of the Piedmont and Tidewater, although they still remained a small minority of the overall population of colonial Virginia.

These dissenters, although retaining many aspects of Anglican forms of worship, culture, and theology, strongly emphasized individual spiritual experience, the centrality of the Bible in religious and secular life, and simple music and worship rites over the highly formal, prescribed forms, lessons, and liturgy of the Anglican Church. In addition, although Presbyterians and Anglicans emphasized strong forms of church governance, Presbyterian government was built from individual congregations up, based on the belief
that God’s truth and spirit would manifest itself in the body of believers. In contrast, the Church of England imposed a strict hierarchy of bishops, and power radiated downward from the Bishop of London and the monarch.\(^8\) Even in its earliest days, the Hanover revivals sparked controversy and tension with Virginia’s ruling class, who viewed the Anglican Church as an extension of their own power; because the Church operated as the center for colonial economic, political, and social life, the movement away from or challenge to this Establishment acted as a somewhat destabilizing influence on the society in general. Similarly, because the churches were controlled by powerful vestries made up of local gentry and other elites, the growth of religious dissent threatened their ability to maintain the system of paternalism which ordered all aspects of colonial life.

At first glance, the language of Witherspoon’s Princeton debates rings with the same radical language used by patriot republicans in their fight to free the colonies from British rule. However, the emphasis of Calvinist theology on rigid order, discipline, and obedience formed the foundation for colonial Presbyterianism and ultimately resulted in the conservatism, submission, and loyalty to governing bodies and officials which characterized Virginia Presbyterians’ approach to their pursuit of religious toleration. Similarly, Scottish Enlightenment ideas expounded by Witherspoon, Davies, and their followers were applied to religious and spiritual matters only. Although Presbyterians in Virginia were actively engaged with local and royal governing bodies, their ultimate goals were religious rather than political. By seeking religious toleration from British religious and political figures, Virginia Presbyterians actually welcomed England’s rule of the colony rather than challenged it. When independence and revolution did come,

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Presbyterian leadership cautiously joined the struggle and was split on issues surrounding the legal status of dissenters and the separation of church and state. Far from acting as radical revolutionaries intent on weakening the authority of the state, Presbyterians unfailingly demonstrated their loyalty and submission and their commitment to upholding established social, political, and religious structures.

Historians of the colonial and revolutionary era vary greatly in their interpretation of religion’s role in politics. Jon Butler noted that, in the historiographic record, dissenting evangelicalism “is the single most explanatory device in contemporary American history, outstripping such once powerful but now enfeebled predecessors as Puritanism, the rise of the middle class, industrialism, urbanization, or even the growth of democracy. In the current literature, dissenting evangelicalism explains in whole or in part the American Revolution, Jacksonian Democracy, antebellum reform, foreign conquest, the American family, women’s rights, and even republicanism.” In general, religious and political historians alike place the Great Awakening at the forefront of explaining an upheaval of authority and order which helped set the stage for revolutionary ferment. For example, Gordon Wood writes that “by challenging clerical unity, shattering the communal churches, and cutting people loose from ancient religious bonds, the religious revivals became in one way or another a massive defiance of traditional authority. The individualistic logic of Protestantism... could contribute little to the deferential faith and obedience on which monarchy ultimately rested.”

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Frank Lambert portrays the Great Awakening as a cultural war which pitted Anglican and Puritan elites against the disenfranchised lower classes and those with cultural, ethnic, or religious identities other than the mainstream.\(^\text{11}\)

Similarly, Gary B. Nash posits that the Awakening "was to relocate authority collectively in the mass of common people," and Patricia Bonomi asserts that "religion has always been considered a likely agent of radicalism....[and the Great Awakening] provided a kind of ‘practice model’ which enabled the provincials to ‘rehearse’—though unwittingly—a number of the situations, and the arguments appropriate to them, that would reappear with the political crisis of the 1760s and 1770s."\(^\text{12}\) Notably, Alan Heimert has said that "Liberalism was a profoundly elitist and conservative ideology, while evangelical religion embodied a radical and even democratic challenge to the standing order of colonial America."\(^\text{13}\) Heimert also makes the point that evangelical preachers such as Samuel Davies, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards, set the tone early for the cultural manifestations of the Revolution in that they made oratory a vehicle for uniting groups of people, especially the population not involved in politics, under a set of ideas or beliefs. The skillful, eloquent, and powerful preaching of evangelical ministers later set the stage for oratory as a medium for mobilizing the masses.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Heimert, 132-138.
In contrast, some scholars have recently focused on the religious undercurrents at the time of the Revolution while distancing them from the main political struggle. For example, Jon Butler contends that, "at its heart, the Revolution was a profoundly secular event. The causes that brought it into being and the ideologies that shaped it placed religious concerns more at its margins than at its center." Although religion was a central issue in secondary causes of the Revolution, such as the controversy over whether to establish an Anglican bishop in North America, "the religious world invoked in the Declaration was a deist's world, at best; at worst, the Declaration was simply indifferent to religious concerns and issues."  

This debate over religion's role in the separation of the American colonies from Great Britain is almost as old as the separation itself. Within the larger context of the Great Awakening and colonial religious life, examination of the history of Presbyterianism in colonial America began shortly after the close of the American Revolution; in 1791, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States charged a group of prominent ministers with collecting documents and information relating to the Presbyterian churches throughout the new nation and to compile the information into a comprehensive narrative. However, it and several subsequent attempts never yielded a completed product. Presbyterian leaders lamented that a thorough study of "the history of the rise, progress, and peculiar character of American Presbyterianism, has for some time been considered a great desideratum by many of the members of our denomination," and works on the Presbyterian Church in colonial America were at last

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produced beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{17} The Memoir of the Rev. Samuel Davies, (un-attributed, 1832), William Foote’s Sketches of Virginia: Historical and Biographical (1850), Richard Webster’s A History of the Presbyterian Church in America (1858), E. H. Gillett’s History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1864), Charles Briggs’ American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History (1885), and George Hays’ Presbyterians: A Popular Narrative of their Origin, Progress, Doctrines, and Achievements (1892) all detail the relationship between Presbyterians in the Revolution, in Virginia and on the national scale, in varying detail.

However, none portrays Presbyterians as a group as the vanguards of Revolution. Rather, they focus on specific individuals, events, or groups which were active in the Revolutionary cause. For example, Gillett and Briggs briefly describe the individual actions and involvement of several ministers, especially John Witherspoon, but Briggs maintains that “the great body of American Presbyterians hesitated about breaking altogether with the mother country; they made the distinction between the ministry and the crown, and strove to maintain their allegiance to the monarch while throwing off the yoke of his ministers” until 1775, well after the Revolutionary movement was underway.\textsuperscript{18} Each of the nineteenth-century authors’ self-professed purpose in compiling their works was to illustrate appealing examples of Presbyterians in history, for Presbyterian audiences, both nationally and in Virginia. For example, Foote wrote “to delineate some of the scenes witnessed in Virginia, and portray the characters of some of


her children, and of some, who captivated by her beauty and fertility, cast in their lot, for life and for death, for glory and wealth, or poverty and suffering, and aided in the working out of the system of things which has been, and is, the glory of Virginia.”

By recounting stories of people and events, these authors de-emphasized analytical interpretation of roles and ideology in favor of anecdotal “sketches,” “memoirs,” and “vignettes.” This nostalgic and even rhapsodized focus resulted in broad generalization of the links between Presbyterians and the Revolution: “The seed of American Protestantism was sown in a New England blizzard. Its Presbyterian type sprouted in a Philadelphia spring snow. It shot its stalk upward in a New Jersey midwinter Sabbath ordination. It blossomed amid the tempest of the Revolution.”

Although nineteenth century authors made few concrete links between the body of American Presbyterians and the early origins of the Revolution, they placed colonial Presbyterianism and Presbyterian leaders on a pedestal which set the stage for twentieth-century interpretation of Presbyterian groups as leaders of the Revolutionary movement.

Emphasizing the spiritual aspects of the Revolution, these early works universally note the deleterious effect of the war on the Church itself. As Briggs noted, “the Presbyterian Church suffered severely by the war of Independence; its ministers and elders went into the struggle for constitutional liberty with all their strength; churches were destroyed, ministers and elders were slain, congregations were scattered, vital religion was neglected, and morality was weakened.”

Similarly, Hays wrote that “the

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21 Briggs, 352.
work of the Church, from the reunion in 1758 to the opening of the war in 1775, was seriously impeded by the political distractions and excitement in the country....As might be expected religion suffered greatly during this preliminary period as well as during the progress of the war.”

Gillett’s dramatic account explains that “There was too much else to engage public attention to allow much regard to be given to the claims of religion....Sabbath desecration prevailed to an alarming extent. Infidelity, in many quarters, soon acquired a foothold. The civil character of the war...gave it a peculiar ferocity, and produced a licentiousness of morals of which there is scarce a parallel at the present day....Thus at the close of war religion was, on every side, in an exceedingly decayed state.

These Presbyterians saw the Revolution at least partially in terms of its religious outcomes, and although the cause of religious liberty eventually triumphed, spiritual life suffered. In examining religion’s role in the Revolution, historians in the nineteenth century explored the roots of an increasingly secularized American society. Signaling fear of rising secularism, nineteenth-century historiography tended to stress the triumph of religion during the revolutionary period and explore its subsequent decline.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, historians, church-goers, and the public alike have associated the winning of American freedom with the rise of American evangelicalism; for most scholars and lay people, it is easy to draw the conclusion that religious liberty and political liberty were won during the same conflict against tyrannical and oppressive government. Presbyterians especially have been celebrated, as a group, for not only contributing to the revolutionary movement but to helping start it even before the political crises of the 1760s and 1770s. For example, Alton B. Altfather’s 1920s article on early Presbyterianism in Virginia makes the sweeping statement that “History

22 Hays, 113-115.

23 Gillett, 195-96.
accords to Presbyterians the honor of being the first to combine to resist the impositions of the mother country upon the colonists." Similarly, Presbyterians have often been hailed as harbingers of American democracy because of implications of Calvinist theology and because of Presbyterian forms of church government. For example, Altfather claims that the Presbyterian Church "gave character to our free institutions" such as the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. However, a closer look at available sources and materials reveals a much more complex web of events, trends, and movements which indicate that religious and political liberties were not only completely separate in most eighteenth century minds, but often they conflicted with each other. This paradox is especially true for Virginia, in which many evangelicals acted as a conservative and even loyalist influence, and most republicans behind the revolution resisted granting religious toleration and freedom to dissenters.

Older scholarship on the Great Awakening in Virginia asserts that religious dissent, and especially Presbyterianism, was directly linked with the objective of overthrowing the established order, which consisted of the Virginia planter class and the royal government. More generally, these scholars equate religious freedom with personal liberty and thus conclude that the movement for toleration was at its core a drive for individual enjoyment of the concepts of liberty, justice, natural rights, and equality, which were the foundation of Revolutionary doctrine in the colonies. Historian William Henry Foote, in his *Sketches of Virginia*, details the careers of the Presbyterian clergy of colonial Virginia while introducing his work, "whose object is to rescue from oblivion

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25 Altfather, 277.
the names and virtues of noble men,—‘Sons of Liberty.’”

Foote, in the introduction of his book, heavily stresses the link between religious toleration and the ideal of liberty embodied by the Revolution. Similarly, Wesley M. Gewehr, in his *Great Awakening in Virginia*, directly links the awakening with “the rise of political democracy, and to the social revolution which had transformed the Old Dominion by the end of the eighteenth century.” Gewehr took this conclusion a step further when he argued that “the dissenters fought the battle for religious liberty, well knowing that the overthrow of privilege in the Church must precede the establishment of political equality.” Gewehr implies that the religious revivals of the Great Awakening were at least partially a deliberate attempt to weaken the established church and, in turn, the planter class and royal officials.

Scholars include Presbyterian Samuel Davies in their assessment of the link between the religious movement and revolutionary principles. Alice M. Baldwin asserts that,

Begun by the people of Hanover who were inspired by Whitefield’s sermons, it [the revival movement] was continued most valiantly by Samuel Davies....One cannot read the sermons, addresses and letters of the New Light clergy without becoming convinced that the Bible and the ideas of religious liberty held by the Presbyterian ministers and taught to their people are at least one main source of the political convictions current in Revolutionary America.

Baldwin’s writing paints the Presbyterians of Hanover and nearby counties as rebellious heroes which inspired the next generation’s revolutionary ideals. However, any influence

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28 Gewehr, 104.

29 Baldwin, 52-53.
Davies and the Hanover Presbyterians had upon the formation of revolutionary principles was indirect. He continually declared his fervent loyalty to the Crown and the royal government, his struggle for toleration was purely religious, and his few forays into politics were aimed solely at promoting his ministry. Davies died suddenly in 1761 and therefore could not have participated in any events linked directly to the outbreak of war and the rebellion, but he must also be acquitted of promoting any unrest or disunity in relations with Great Britain which might have eventually contributed to the outbreak of Revolution.

Specialists in Virginia history also attribute a great deal of revolutionary impulse to the effects of the Great Awakening, both by asserting the radicalness and influence of evangelical dissenters on politics, but also by emphasizing the social and political implications of the act of dissenting from the Established Church. For example, J.D. Eggleston asserts that Thomas Jefferson’s

Measures [for religious freedom] were carried by members from the back counties [with large Scots-Irish populations], which meant Presbyterian votes, as that church largely predominated in these colonies....That Virginia led the other colonies in the measures of the revolution is clearly shown by the letters which passed between the committees of correspondence. Thus we find Presbyterianism in Virginia a powerful agent in leading the colonies to independence.  

However, Eggleston’s conclusions are flawed on several different levels; although Jefferson’s proposal received voting support from Scots-Irish regions, their political weight was carried by Jefferson and Madison. And, in addition to failing to distinguish between the politically and ethnically charged Scots-Irish Presbyterians on the frontier from the more politically reserved English Presbyterians in the Tidewater and Piedmont, he implies that Presbyterianism as an idea, religion, or system of government was the

driving force between their political views, without taking into account their distinct ethnic and historic reasons for revolt.

Much of the scholarship on the Great Awakening and Presbyterians in Virginia stresses the threat posed by dissenters to the established religious, social, and political structure. Most notably, Wesley Gewehr, in his study on the Great Awakening in Virginia, claims that “The success of Davies and Presbyterians in Virginia had a wider significance than the mere establishment of another group of religionists in the colony. It was a portent of a social and political as well as a religious revolution in the life of the colony—the beginning of a movement from below which was to constantly push upward the common folks....The Presbyterians represent the first phase of this internal revolution.”

Furthermore, Gewehr focuses on the populist nature of the awakening:

The evangelical revival gave to the common people of Virginia their first leadership....It is a commonly accepted fact that the dissenters were everywhere strong supporters of the Revolution....So it was in Virginia; the Presbyterians and Baptists were identified with the republican cause. There was every reason why they should be. The special privileges of the Established Church...and the various restrictions placed upon the religious freedom of the nonconformists were repugnant alike to the principles of the Great Awakening and of the American Revolution. Was there any difference between taxation without representation in the state and the compulsory payment of tithes to the Anglican Church by dissenters who could not be represented on the vestries? 

However, Gewehr’s source material relied heavily on sermons and other writings reflecting the theological concept of liberty, much different than the politicized, Enlightenment use of the word. In addition, Gewehr fails to take into account the numbers of landowners, merchants, gentry, and others involved with the Presbyterian

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31 Gewehr, 103-4.

32 Gewehr, 188-89.
Church who could not be considered “common people” finding a voice only in religious dissent.

Building on Gewehr’s concept of dissent from below, Alice Baldwin argues that the sermons, letters, journals, and other works of the New Light Presbyterian ministers themselves indicate they were (or would have been if they lived) strong supporters of the revolutionary cause. She argues that the religious doctrine taught and preached by those ministers was ideologically radical, even if it was not intended to be applied to politics, and that “the clergy helped in making familiar to the common people the basic principles on which the Revolution was fought.”

In addition, she casts all non-Anglicans in Virginia as “rebels” because they revolted against the Established Church, part of the state’s machine of social and political control. However, she inaccurately groups more radical Old Side Scots-Irish Presbyterians on the frontier and in the Valley with the more conservative New-Side ministers and converts in the Piedmont and Tidewater. Like Gewehr, Baldwin uses the language of sermons and other writings to draw conclusions on their political motives, but makes too much of a leap in claiming that ideas such as liberty and freedom, used by New Lights in a religious context, equated with the rhetorical terminology of the Enlightenment. For example, she writes, “One cannot read the sermons, addresses and letters of the New Light clergy without becoming convinced that the Bible and the ideas of religious liberty held by the Presbyterian ministers and

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33 Baldwin, 76.

34 Baldwin, 54.

35 Baldwin, 53.
taught to their people are at least one main source of the political convictions current in Revolutionary America.”

While the Great Awakening and religious fragmentation have been offered by historians as a device for explaining a weakening sense of loyalty to the mother country, a growing sense of individualism, and the spread of Enlightenment rhetoric and principles to the general population, Presbyterians in Virginia have also received attention from scholars studying ethnic and geographic aspects of the Revolution. For example, James Leyburn in his *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History*, concluded that their rise in politics, especially in Virginia and Pennsylvania, was a result of the necessity of groups along the frontier to call attention to their security against Indian and French attacks, and their activism in sharing concerns led to the French and Indian War. And, although Scots-Irish settlers retained their Presbyterian ideas and modes of government, they used the structures and institutions of the Anglican Church in a civil sense, electing Presbyterians to vestries which acted as justices, oversaw elections, and managed support for widows, orphans, and the poor. Rather than from Scots-Irish agitators, liberal and revolutionary movement within the government came from Tidewater and Piedmont gentry like Jefferson and Madison. He concludes that the historiographical tradition of Scots-Irish origins of the revolution is a result of the fact that “Nineteenth-century issues have been mistakenly read back into eighteenth-century politics: small farmers *versus* planters, free labor *versus* slavery, Dissenters *versus* Anglicans, deprivation *versus* privilege, individualism *versus* tradition.”

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36 Baldwin, 59.

Leyburn uses Presbyterianism as an essential trait to illustrate the extent of a region's large Scots-Irish population: "Two counties in the Valley of Virginia...claim to be the most Scotch-Irish counties in the present United States. It is said they have more Presbyterians within their borders than members of all other denominations together. Telephone books list names beginning with 'Mac' in a separate category from those under 'M'." Furthermore, he interprets several references of British officials to the revolt as the result of Presbyterian agitation as evidence of the Scots-Irish involvement, making "Presbyterian" synonymous with "Scots-Irish" but without meaning to imply that Presbyterians of other ethnic backgrounds were just as revolutionary. Leyburn writes that the argument tying Calvinist theology and Presbyterian forms of government to revolutionary ideology "clearly breaks down among the Scots in America, thousands of whom were Tories and loyalists." Similarly, Gregory Nobles' study of frontier settlement describes the distinct cultural and religious differences between Scots-Irish settlers and their English counterparts but stresses that "difference cannot always be equated with defiance." Although a large part of the revolutionary movement came from Scots-Irish settlers in the Valley of Virginia and other frontier regions on the continent, and these settlers tended to be Presbyterians, their Presbyterianism was not a leading factor in their revolt.

Recently, Rhys Isaac has employed a model of anthropological and deconstructive inquiry, using the theme of religious, social, and cultural "landscapes", to

38 Leyburn, 200.

39 Leyburn, 306n.

show that dissenting religions challenged the system of deference, authority, and structure which gave landed gentry elites power over Virginia's population. Because Virginia's revolutionary movement was led by these elites rather than as a populist or dissenting movement, Isaac argues, the "patriot movement in Virginia may be understood as in part a defensive response from the traditional order to the transformations in popular orientation toward authority manifested in the spread of evangelism."\(^{41}\) In his highly influential work *The Transformation of Virginia*, he points out that Virginia's Presbyterians were not radically revolutionary but did contribute to the revolt by weakening the English and Anglican structures around them.\(^{42}\) Isaac's study primarily focuses on the rise of Virginia's Baptists, who presented much more of a challenge to the Establishment than the Presbyterians.

In contrast, many recent studies discredit the thesis of Presbyterians and other dissenters in Virginia attempting to weaken the established Church and government, instead asserting that evangelicals worked within existing social and political structures and used them to their advantage in order to strengthen their religious mission and political circumstances. For example, Jon Butler points out that "denominations were 'republican' not only in their love of virtue—actually in their love of Jesus, of course—but in their institutional sophistication. They tamed power so that they might exercise it, a tactic not unfamiliar to the creators of the federal government. Church members understood that their Presbyterian, Baptist, or Methodist identity hinged on institutional


Similarly, Roger Payne’s article “New Light in Hanover County” stresses that “the awakening in Hanover did not represent a reaction to social decay but rather participated in the process of extending British social structures into the Virginia Piedmont” and that Isaac and other historians failed to take into account the gentry elites involved in the Hanover revivals, which complicated the social and political implications of the movement. Further, Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier, in their study of American Presbyterianism, clearly describe the distinction between the radical Scots-Irish frontier settlers and their more moderate leaders based in the Piedmont, who as “conservative pragmatists attempted to quash intemperate patriotic rhetoric and negotiate a policy that would appease the demands of both the Crown and the colonies.”

Studies comparing Baptist and Presbyterian support of the Revolution most clearly emphasize Virginia Presbyterians’ conservatism when contrasted with Baptist radicalism. For example, in her study of Baptist revivals in Virginia, Jewel L. Spangler claims that, while Presbyterians challenged the Establishment enough to make way for more radical Baptists, they overwhelmingly “mirrored the dominant culture far more than it challenged it.” Most fascinating is John Ragosta’s study of Presbyterian and Baptist petitions before and during the Revolution, comparing their rhetoric and examining the motives behind them. Ragosta asserts that, rather than wholeheartedly joining the Virginia elites’ movement toward Revolution,

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Dissenters, too, were keenly aware of Virginia's need for their support.... Virginia dissenters seized the opportunity to negotiate with political leaders... for freedom of conscience in return for support of the war effort.... With dissenters threatening to withhold full support for the war, and Britain making overtures to them, Virginia's political establishment, with the grudging acquiescence of the established church, slowly accepted religious freedom to the extent it seemed necessary for effective mobilization.47

Furthermore, he claims that Isaac's analysis of the elites' republicanism as a reaction against popular revival is inaccurate, and he instead emphasizes that, "as those in authority moved decisively toward forming [post-Independence] governmental institutions, the necessity of gaining support and cooperation from the evangelical masses required patriot leaders to include liberal freedoms within the definition of what it was they were fighting for."48

Throughout the historiographical record, a pattern has developed which endows evangelical dissenters with the image of being fundamentally and essentially American. For example, Scots-Irish groups, and their Presbyterian background, have long been viewed as a core ethnic, social, and political group throughout American history, celebrated for their virtues and contributions to Americans' character. For example, Altfather wrote that, "In the hardships of years of persecution Presbyterians learned to prize more than ever the privileges and truths of their simple and scriptural faith, and that they and their descendants in America might enjoy the same inestimable blessings, they were ready to lay all they had upon the altar of their adopted country, and resist, even unto death, every attempt to deprive them of their religious or civil liberty."49 Similarly,


48 Ragosta, 233.

49 Altfather, 277.
denominational historian Sean Michael Lucas has written that, "Presbyterian historians generally made the case that Presbyterians were quintessentially American—as founders and custodians of American civilization, Presbyterians presented themselves as the bulwark of American liberties, institutions, and good manners."\(^{50}\)

Similarly, continuing today is the generations-long tradition in America of individuals and communities linking themselves with the glorious cause, struggle, and triumph of the Revolution as part of essential identity. Just as members of societies like the Daughters of the American Revolution trace connections to the Revolution through lineage and genealogy, Protestants and Scots-Irish descendents identify themselves with the origins and ideology of the Revolution through ethnic, regional, and religious connections. According to James Leyburn, descendents of Scots-Irish settlers today celebrate their ancestors’ contributions to American history, attributing much of the best in American political tradition to Scotch-Irish pioneers. According to these eulogists, the original democratic influence in the country came from the Scotch-Irish; they contributed the deciding forces in the Revolutionary War; they helped shape the Constitution, giving the nation its republican form of government; and after 1789 they provided presidents, justices, legislators, and governors far in excess of their proportional numbers. All of these contributions (and others) were claimed to be the natural and inevitable results of the inherent fine qualities of Scotch-Irish character and of Presbyterianism.\(^{51}\)

Descendents of Scottish and Scots-Irish settlers in American often stress their leadership and ideological impetus toward revolution while emphasizing their Presbyterian background, although their Presbyterianism is a corollary to their radicalism rather than the cause of it.

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\(^{51}\) Leyburn, 296.
In addition to seeking ethnic and genealogical ties to revolutionary heritage, today’s Presbyterians “moved to sacralize independence much as they had earlier sacralized the landscape.”\textsuperscript{52} The Bicentennial celebrations offered Presbyterians an excellent opportunity to, along with the entire nation, celebrate their group’s contribution to American independence; in 1976, two of the four issues of the \textit{Journal of Presbyterian History} were devoted to so-called Presbyterian revolutionaries throughout the colonies, and a statue celebrating John Witherspoon’s religious and political contributions was rededicated in Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{53} As Lucas asserts, Presbyterians have long had a “cozy relationship with American culture” because of their desire to make “sure that America remained one nation under God.”\textsuperscript{54} Much like nineteenth-century historians who created an interpretation of religious impetus toward revolution in order to spiritualize America’s secular past, today’s evangelical Protestants secularize their denominations’ religious struggle throughout history in order to place themselves within America’s predominant cultural, historic, and ideological identity.

Throughout historiographical record and popular historical memory, Presbyterians have been remembered in light of their contributions to the American story, and this trend is most evident in the scholarly literature on and traditional remembrance of the colonies’ revolutionary conflict. While well-known figures such as John Witherspoon have been rightly celebrated for their contributions to American independence, the story of Presbyterianism’s role in Virginia’s revolt is far more complex than the traditional

\textsuperscript{52} Butler, \textit{Awash in a Sea of Faith}, 195.

\textsuperscript{53} Jeffry H. Morrison, \textit{John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), xiii.

\textsuperscript{54} Lucas, 50-51.
narrative suggests. Rather than presenting a radical and forceful challenge to Britain’s rule in Virginia, New Light Presbyterians tended to reinforce British authority through their legal, social, and cultural reliance on the mother country. Their quest for free exercise of religion often focused on the removal of obstacles rather than embodying a radical, ideologically-based challenge to the Anglican establishment. Difficulty in securing toleration from Virginia’s powerful gentry elites caused dissenting Presbyterians to look to English ruling authorities for relief. As the revolutionary conflict approached, Presbyterians in the Piedmont and Tidewater cautiously and conservatively joined the revolt that was led by republican Anglicans. In the newly independent Virginia, Baptists replaced Presbyterians as the champions of religious liberty.
CHAPTER II

EMERGING DISSENT: SAMUEL DAVIES AND THE EARLY HANOVER GROUP

Throughout Virginia’s colonial history, and especially beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, Presbyterianism occupied a seemingly contradictory place in the religious landscape. While officially operating as a body dissenting from the Anglican Church, Presbyterian groups nonetheless participated in Anglican forms of worship and government, claimed an equal level of establishment through affiliation with the Church of Scotland, and were well integrated into fabric of Virginia’s society, culture, and politics, all of which also leaned heavily on the Anglican Church’s place as a cornerstone of each community. Rather than challenging the authority of Britain or local governing bodies, Presbyterians consistently lobbied for religious toleration within the confines of mainstream legal and political structures while continually asserting their loyalty and submission to those in power. Facing difficulty in securing religious toleration from local gentry who controlled Virginia’s legislative and judicial bodies, dissenting Presbyterians increasingly turned to royal officials in Virginia and friendly Anglican and dissenting officials in England for support. These alliances between the mother country and Virginia Presbyterians strengthened the dissenter’s loyalty to the Crown.

Although it did not become a major religious force in Virginia until well into the eighteenth century, Presbyterianism and its sister denominations have been present in Virginia since the earliest days of the colony’s founding. Puritans, closely associated ideologically and historically with Presbyterian groups in Britain, comprised a large portion of the Virginia Company’s original leadership, one of the factors in the
company’s abolition by James I in 1624. Although early colonial law required strict
conformity with the Church of England, Presbyterian clergy of English and Scottish
origin continued to be authorized by the Archbishop of Canterbury to fill pulpits
throughout Virginia because of a lack of Anglican-ordained clergy. The last known
Presbyterian minister of an Anglican parish died in 1710, indicating the great level of
compatibility which existed between the two groups.¹

Scottish and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians began to settle in Virginia in large
numbers to escape escalating religious and ethnic tensions following the Restoration of
the English monarchy. Beginning around 1670, emigrants arrived in the lower Tidewater
regions of Virginia and spread further up the James River and onto the Eastern Shore.
The bulk of initial emigrants traveled instead to Pennsylvania and within a few years
began to make their way down into the Shenandoah Valley and Blue Ridge Mountain
regions. Although distinct religious identities and practices likely did not flourish along
the frontier, a few Presbyterian leaders emerged in the Chesapeake. Most notably,
Francis Makemie, based in Accomack County, traveled throughout Virginia and
Maryland to minister to scattered Presbyterian communities and was instrumental in
establishing the first American presbytery in Philadelphia in 1706.² Presbyterians
continued to arrive in Virginia as indentured servants, family units, or refugees, but were
absorbed into Anglican congregations.³ As English Presbyterians living and ministering


alongside Anglican neighbors, or as Scottish and Scots-Irish refugees, Presbyterians maintained a steady, though low-profile, presence throughout Virginia’s colonial history.

If the model of Presbyterian integration into Virginia’s religious life was well-entrenched by the middle of the eighteenth century, so was the pattern of suspicion and distrust of any groups operating outside the framework of the establishment. In order to maintain rigid order and unity of purpose among settlers, religious observance and strict adherence to established rites were mandated by some of the colony’s earliest laws. The Church of England, the colony’s Established Church, maintained strict requirements for attendance and punishment and fines for non-conformers. At the height of the English Civil War, as Puritans gained control of Parliament and abolished the Church of England in 1645, Virginia’s General Assembly, with an air strikingly similar to the Revolution over a century later, rejected Parliamentary authority over colonial affairs and adopted an act requiring the use of the Church of England Prayer Book, and led by Governor William Berkeley, expelled Puritans from the colony. England’s Act of Toleration, passed in 1689 and extended to the colonies in 1699, theoretically allowed dissenters to practice their own faiths but lacked the bureaucratic infrastructure to implement it as it was intended, since no bishop presided in Virginia and the court structures were incompatible. Although in Virginia the Toleration Act resulted in a somewhat standardized procedure for regulating dissenters, ultimately it upheld the hegemony and

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4 Brydon, 35.

power of the Established Church and was never completely applied to Virginia's complex religious landscape.

However, as Scotch-Irish emigrants began to arrive in Virginia, along with German Church of the Brethren Refugees, French Huguenots, and others, Virginia's governing elite began to recognize the advantage of welcoming European dissenting groups to settle along the frontier, acting as a buffer from Indian or foreign attack.  

For example, as the Synod of Philadelphia petitioned Governor William Gooch to ensure religious toleration for Presbyterians in the Valley, Gooch responded, “I have been always inclined to favor the people who have lately removed from other provinces to settle on the western side of our great mountains, so you may be assured that no interruption shall be given to any minister of your profession who shall come among them.” However, Virginians remained wary of foreign or dissenting groups in more settled, eastern areas of the colony because of the strong presence of the Anglican establishment. As New Light Presbyterians became more active in Tidewater and Piedmont Virginia in the 1740s and 1750s, conflict with Virginia's rulers was inevitable. Although dissenting Presbyterians actively campaigned for greater religious liberty, their corporate actions and methods consistently reflected respect for and loyalty to Virginia's ruling institutions and the authority of the mother country.

Organized New Light Presbyterianism in Virginia began slowly through a small group of English colonists in Hanover County, located in the Piedmont region. Encouraged by publications received from Scottish acquaintances, sometime around  

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7 James, 23.
1740, a small group of farmers and tradesmen led by Samuel Morris began to absent themselves from Anglican services because of dislike of the parish minister’s sermons. The group constructed a meeting house in order to read religious writings and the Bible together, and members of the group were eventually called before the Governor and Council in Williamsburg. One account claims that, when questioned about their denominational affiliation, the group’s leaders replied that they were not affiliated with a particular group and suggested they were followers of Luther’s reformed teachings. After being examined, Governor Gooch, who had been raised in the Church of Scotland before conforming to Anglicanism, declared that they conformed to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and informed them that “they were not only tolerated but acknowledged as part of the established church of the realm.”

Another more probable version indicates that the Hanover group remained unaffiliated with any organized church until they were visited by William Robinson, an itinerant preacher sent by the Presbytery of New Brunswick to minister to Scotch-Irish settlements in the Valley. After finding themselves in agreement with Robinson’s preaching, Morris and his group contacted the New Castle Presbytery, and the Hanover group received a series of itinerant preachers until the arrival of Samuel Davies as a permanent minister.

Once settled in Virginia, Davies began an itinerant ministry in several towns and counties surrounding Hanover, including Loudoun, Richmond, Petersburg, and the

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9 Thompson, 52-53.

10 Gewehr, 51-52.
One of the most controversial aspects of his ministry was his desire to preach at meetinghouses other than Hanover’s Reading Room, and the very nature of itinerancy drew immediate suspicion and criticism from local clergy and elites. Gooch directly associated unlicensed itinerant preaching with open rebellion to the established order and warned of “certain false teachers that are lately crept into the government,” because he assumed that these preachers were uneducated and unlicensed, were teaching false religion, and participated in attacks upon the Anglican clergy of the colony.12

Similarly, correspondence between local Anglican clergy reveals deep suspicion of Presbyterians’ itinerant ministry and charismatic preaching. Whereas Presbyterians considered itinerant or traveling ministers a survival mechanism to cope with the wide distances between and small numbers of Presbyterian congregations, Anglican leaders and landed gentry considered this travel and itinerancy dangerous because it created links between groups and communities that could not be controlled by local elites. Rev. Patrick Henry, Sr. (uncle of the well-known revolutionary orator) referred to itinerant preachers William Robinson, John Blair, and John Roan as “wild & wicked men”13 and lamented

That the Govinor & Council never intended to encourage Itinerant Preachers.... I need not inform you of the present distracted condition of my Parish nor of the future disturbances I justly apprehend from these Itinerants, who make it their Study to screw up the People to the greatest heights of religious Phrenzy, and then leave them in that wild state, for perhaps ten or twelve months, till another Enthusiast comes among them, to repeat the same thing over again.14

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Anglicans, clergy, elites, and royal leaders considered itinerant ministry so dangerous because it threatened the Church as the cornerstone of Virginia’s rigid social and political hierarchy; as Rhys Isaac has pointed out, “all members of the community were required to be under a spiritual guardian who needed proper authorization to exercise his function. [Dissenting] itinerancy was anathema because it negated these conditions.”

Those in power “quickly came to regard itinerancy as a fundamental challenge to their place in the community and their role as guardians of the social order. This perception soon gave rise to a discourse of opposition which represented itinerancy as an engine of social upheaval.”

In response to criticism from Church and government officials, Davies led the Hanover group by repeatedly asserting the practical need for travel to create an effective ministry. He pointed out, “the nearest [meetinghouses] are twelve or fifteen miles distant from each other, and the extremes about forty. My congregation is very much dispersed; and notwithstanding the number of meeting-houses, some live twenty, some thirty and a few forty miles from the nearest. Were they all compactly situate in one county, they would be sufficient to form three distinct congregations.”

The Hanover Presbytery later petitioned the House of Burgesses to allow licensed preachers to travel to multiple meetinghouses by explaining, “we cannot, consistent with the duties of our office, wholly

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17 Memoir of the Rev. Samuel Davies, Formerly President of the College of New Jersey (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1832), 21.
confine our ministrations to any place or number of places [because it is not] easy to determine where it would be the most expedient to fix upon a stated place for public worship.” The petition also points out the distance between meetinghouses often prevented women, children, and servants from attending, and the number of meetinghouses was greater than the number of clergy, requiring them to travel between locations in order to reach everyone.\(^{18}\)

In a 1752 letter to the Bishop of London, Davies built his defense of the Hanover Presbytery’s practices of itinerancy by comparing them with those of Anglican ministers:

> It is very common here, my lord, when a parish which has had sundry churches under the care of one minister, is increased, to divide it into two or more, each of which has a minister. And I submit to your lordship, whether my congregation may not be so divided, when an opportunity occurs of obtaining another minister? And whether, till that time I may not, according to the precedent around me in the established church, take the care of all the dissenters at the places already licensed...when I do it for no selfish views, but from the unhappy necessity imposed upon me by present circumstances?\(^{19}\)

In meeting with Virginia governor Robert Dinwiddie the same year, Davies used the Establishment’s skepticism of itinerancy to stress his own intention of maintaining a structured, peaceful, and regulated congregation and to increase the Presbyterian Church’s presence in Virginia. Significantly, in this meeting Davies himself repudiated the practice of outright itinerant preaching, claiming that because he confined himself to the same congregation, he was ministering to a finite group of people, even though distance required him to travel to separate meetinghouses in order to do so. Dinwiddie recalled of the meeting, Davies “desired I would not look on him as an Itinerant preacher, which character he abhor’ed, but agreed with me that in the Meeting houses already

\(^{18}\) James, 43-44.

\(^{19}\) Foote, Sketches of Virginia 1st Series, 187. Emphasis mine.
Lisenced he could not discharge the essential duties of his Ministry and therefore desired me to admit one Mr. Todd for his assistant." By pointing out the practical needs for either itinerant ministry or an increase in established ministers, and stressing the structured nature the practice and the Presbyterians’ willingness to conform to Anglican practices and legal requirements, Davies and other Presbyterian leaders demonstrated that their ministry was not a threat to Virginia’s social or legal order.

The Hanover Presbyterians also faced criticism for their willingness to include slaves within their religious communities, although they did not espouse the spiritual equality between slaves and freeholders, as later, more radical dissenting groups did. Patrick Henry, Sr., especially complained of aspects of Davies’ exhortations to enslaved congregants to use their strength to support the English and not take the side of the French during the French and Indian War, writing, “Mr. Davies hath much Reproached Virginia....I Can’t See any Advantage to the Country, to give this account to the Negroes.” Like many New Light congregations, slaves flocked to the service to hear him preach, but Davies was careful to not allow his preaching to undermine the institution of slavery and did not allow racial barriers to break down. Rather, Davies focused his ministry on improving conditions for slaves and laboring to make it more humane by reminding masters of their Christian responsibility for the welfare of those in their care.

20 Thompson, 55-56.


Davies also restricted the type of message and information he presented to slaves attending services to ensure their continued obedience, endeavoring “to bring them under the restraints of the pacific religion of Jesus, which has so friendly an influence on society, and teaches a proper conduct in every station of life.” In doing so, Davies allowed his ministry to reach slaves and work for their benefit, but he acquiesced to the institution so he would not weaken the social and racial order based upon the plantation system. Davies and the other Hanover ministers depended on the goodwill of area planters and slaveholders, whom they assured that “the gospel message would provide security against social upheaval.” Indeed, Virginia Presbyterianism “did not undermine planter society so much as shore it up. It served as one more institution that trained Virginians in the important lessons of social deference, hierarchy, and submission that were fundamental to the smooth operation of the colony.” By reinforcing the system of slavery while ministering to slaves, Presbyterians demonstrated their conservatism and commitment to upholding established social, racial, economic, and political institutions.

Another strong complaint against the dissenting movement was its tendency to encourage open criticism of Anglican clergy and to encourage converts from the Established Church. Patrick Henry, Sr., wrote of his suspicions, although somewhat unsubstantiated, by claiming that dissenting “Enthusiasts...have been at great pains to vilifie the Clergy of this Colony and have told their followers...that they can never reap any benefit by going to hear them...but I believe they have done this chiefly in private,

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23 Foote, Sketches of Virginia 1st Series, 290.


25 Spangler, 68.
for I did not hear that they spoke against it in their Sermons."  

Similarly, Gooch denouncing attacks on Anglican clergy and parishes as “unjust to God, to our king, to our country, to our posterity.”  

Davies and his colleagues took great pains to refute this perception among Church clergy and ruling elites, firmly declaring, “I am not fond…of disseminating sedition and schism. I have no ambition to presbyterianize the colony….I pretend to no superior sanctity above the established clergy, who are piously aiming at the great end of their office.”  

Although Davies tacitly bypassed Virginia’s governing bodies in favor of authorities and institutions based in England, he never overtly challenged Virginia’s existing social and political order. In his letter to the bishop, Davies expressed his desire to refrain from attacking members of any other denomination: “I am sensible, my lord, how hard it is not to suspect and charge corruption of principles upon those who differ in principles from us; and how natural it is to a party spirit…to magnify the practical irregularities of other denominations. Sensible of this, and how inconsistent such a temper is with the generous religion of Jesus, I have conscientiously kept a peculiar guard upon my spirit in this respect.”  

Davies also insisted that, although he welcomed Anglican converts into his congregation, he never actively sought to challenge the membership of the Church of England, and he never openly preached against the Anglican Church.

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26 “Letters of Patrick Henry, Sr.,” 265.

27 Gooch to Synod of Philadelphia, June 20, 1745, quoted in Pilcher, Apostle of Dissent, 31.


29 Foote, Sketches of Virginia 1st Series, 201.

30 George H. Bost, Samuel Davies: Colonial Revivalist and Champion of Religious Toleration (A Part of a Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Divinity School in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy), (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1942), 196.
Davies, in his correspondence with Church and colonial officials, both in Virginia and in England, repeatedly assured correspondents that they were committed to upholding established institutions, in spite of their reputation as trouble-makers; "Presbyterians devoted considerable effort to presenting themselves as supporters of civil and religious authority, even as they worked to maintain a distinct religious practice."³¹ Virginia’s Presbyterians also conscientiously observed legal restrictions in order to demonstrate their commitment to operating within existing laws and regulations, even as they worked to use the law to improve toleration. In contrast to his dissenting predecessors, Davies went first to Williamsburg to apply for the necessary license to preach instead of traveling directly to Hanover upon his arrival in 1745.³² In consistently following the law and maintaining open and loyal communication with colonial civil and religious officials, Presbyterians maintained an excellent relationship with mainstream colonial structures. In Williamsburg, Davies met governor Gooch and made a favorable impression upon him, for Gooch described him as "well-formed...pale and wasted by disease, dignified and courteous in manner."³³ Having proven his legitimacy and loyalty, Davies won the favor of the governor and increased the likelihood that he would be able to gain permission to continue his ministry unfettered. Gooch sought to win the loyalty of dissenting congregations to his government by requiring that they become licensed to preach. Gooch hoped that, by including dissenters in the government and regulating them through licensure, he would be able to have a measure of control over groups whom he regarded as a potential source of unrest and destabilization of the old Anglican order.

³¹ Spangler, 45.
³² Pilcher, *Apostle of Dissent*, 34.
³³ Gooch to Synod, quoted in Pilcher, *Apostle of Dissent*, 34.
in Virginia. Although Gooch remained suspicious of New Light preachers and ministers whom he suspected of actively seeking to convert Anglican church-goers, he “saw the wisdom in making concessions to peaceful dissenters who would pledge allegiance to the civil government.”34 The governor declared that he would officially welcome preachers of any kind into the colony, provided that they first register and obtain proper licenses for preaching in specific meeting houses.35

However, in April 1747, the Council of Colonial Virginia issued a proclamation prohibiting itinerant preachers from conducting religious services or meetings.36 When Gooch’s term as governor ended in 1749, Davies faced a considerably less friendly government in Virginia. The end of Gooch’s term as governor marked the beginning of a long struggle for Davies to secure permission to preach to the New Light Presbyterian congregations in Hanover and surrounding locations. However, as Gooch was eventually replaced by the Earl of Loudoun as governor, Davies and the Hanover Presbytery continued to assert their allegiance to the royal government in the hopes that their religious practices would not be restricted. In July 1756, Davies and John Todd, the moderator of the Presbytery’s governing body, composed a letter to Loudoun upon his arrival in New York which outlined their hopes for his enforcing the Toleration Act:

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Government, and the gracious and equitable Administration of the best of Kings.\textsuperscript{37}

Davies and Todd clearly outlined their argument that they had never received the extent of toleration called for by the law, and their appeal to the governor implies they expected more concessions from him than they had received at the hands of native Virginians.

A similar letter was sent to Governor Fauquier by the Hanover group upon his arrival in 1758, reiterating the presbytery's request for full toleration and assurances of loyalty and submission, especially since Virginia was threatened by the French on the frontier: "The Presbytery, Sir, have nothing to request for themselves, but that your honor would secure and continue to them the peaceable and unmolested enjoyment of the liberties and immunities of the Act of Toleration, as understood in England, while they comply with its requisitions, and conduct themselves as dutiful subjects." Fauquier responded cordially, confirming he intended to uphold the Toleration Act in Virginia:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Gentlemen,--I am extremely obliged to the Presbytery for their kind and affection address....Nothing can give me more pleasure, than the assurances of their endeavors to promote a proper spirit in the people to defend their liberties at this critical juncture....The Presbytery may be assured that I shall always exert myself to support the Act of Toleration, and secure the peaceable enjoyment of its immunities to all his majesty's subjects who conform thereto.}\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

At all times, Davies and the Hanover Presbytery declared their complete loyalty to the British government and their willingness to abide by the restrictions and requirements of the law, yet they fought for increased privileges within existing laws. In turning to royal authorities who had first-hand experience of the Toleration Act's implementation in England, they hoped for a more favorable interpretation than that afforded by Virginia's legislative and judicial bodies.

\textsuperscript{37} Rachal, 61.

\textsuperscript{38} Memoir of the Rev. Samuel Davies, 81-82.
Ironically, Davies formed alliances with British officials because of difficulties in procuring toleration from native Virginians. Within the structure of Virginia’s Anglican Church, true power lay in the hands of the vestries, comprised of landed elites and community leaders and which “served as an immediate embodiment of social authority, both secular and religious.” Competing with vestries were Anglican clergy, viewed by the gentry as socially inferior, dependent upon gentry for patronage and payment of salaries, and viewed with suspicion as possible interlopers sent from the mother country to challenge their political and religious authority. It is little wonder Anglican clergy were apprehensive of dissenters in their midst, for competing denominations challenged their already fragile leadership role in colonial religious life.

It is also not surprising that dissenters turned to British authorities as it became apparent their motions would be continually blocked by native elites. For example, Davies argued that the 1689 Act of Toleration applied to the colonies because the Virginia Assembly of 1699 had acknowledged it as binding in Virginia. Davies also claimed its privileges because of his belief that Parliament had legal authority over the colonies. This contention directly contradicted Revolutionary Virginians’ view that, because the colonies were not represented in Parliament, it had no governing authority over the colonies. Davies further expressed his support for the authority of English officials over the colonies in his belief that creating an Anglican bishop to preside over the colonial Church would improve relations between dissenting groups and the Anglican establishment. Davies also supported the creation of an American bishopric because it

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would allow dissenters to deal directly with British agents rather than through local
government structures unwilling to compromise. In his letter to the Bishop of London,
Davies indicated religious and political advantages of having access to an American
bishop:

> I am fully satisfied, my lord, were there a pious bishop residing in America, it
> would have a happy tendency to reform the church of England here, and maintain
> her purity: and therefore upon a report spread in Virginia, some time ago, that one
> was appointed, I expressed my satisfaction in it; and my poor prayers shall concur
to promote it. I know this is also the sentiment of all my brethren in the Synod of
New York, with whom I have conversed.  

Rather than block the move to install a bishop to preside over Anglicans in America,
which would necessarily strengthen the Church of England and root it more deeply in
colonial administrative structures, Davies supported it because he saw that aligning with
and integrating into religious and civil structures would improve Presbyterians’ goal of
free exercise of religion within the confines of the Toleration Act. Davies’ argument in
favor of parliamentary and ecclesiastical authority over the colonies was the reverse of
the revolutionaries of Virginia who came after him.

Although the gentry sought to maintain their hegemony of power through social
and religious structures, royal governors were charged with uniting the entire colonial
population under the Crown’s rule. Because the balance of Virginia politics resulted in
competition for power between royal officials and the gentry, Davies and the Hanover
dissenters often received much more from royal governors and English Church rulers
than he did from colonial elites. For example, in 1750, Virginia courts revoked a
preaching license previously granted in New Kent County, during a period in which the

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42 Foote, Sketches of Virginia 1st Series, 198.
seat of royal governor was vacant and the government was entirely controlled by Virginians. Furthermore, although the Board of Trade advised that complete religious toleration was vital to the liberty on which the British Constitution rested and should be upheld, the Council denied requests from Davies for new meetinghouse licensures, and Peyton Randolph, Virginia’s attorney general, claimed that the Toleration Act did not apply if the Establishment’s political structures or religious doctrines were challenged. Because the Established Church was a cornerstone of the gentry’s social and political hierarchy, gentry elites blocked toleration measures which might “disturb existing social arrangements by embracing and propagating new beliefs.” Virginia’s unique political and religious systems resulted in close ties formed between Presbyterian leadership and officials representing the Anglican Church and the Crown, who upheld the 1689 Toleration Act provisions allowing dissent in spite of opposition from Virginia’s political elite.

Consistent with the tacit agreement between Gooch and Davies for religious toleration contingent upon licensure and cooperation with the government, the Hanover Presbytery’s 1756 letter to the Earl of Loudoun also described the dissenters’ belief that complete religious toleration in Virginia was a tenet of English law:

We humbly solicit your Excellency’s Patronage, and put ourselves under your Protection; assured, your Excellency will continue to us those Liberties we have enjoyed, particularly the free Exercise of our Religion, according to our Consciences, and the Practice of the established Church of Scotland; and humbly hoping that whereas we have in Times past lain under some Restraints, from which our Brethren in England, under the same religious Establishment, are happily exempted, your Excellency will grant us all the Liberties and Immunities

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of a full Toleration, according to the Laws of England, and particularly according to an Act of Parliament commonly called the Act of Toleration.\textsuperscript{45}

Davies deliberately appealed to English law to further his cause in order to seek protection against local Virginia government, who were indifferent or hostile to his ministry. In appealing to English law as an authority higher than local Virginia laws, Davies demonstrated that he believed that England’s complete authority over the American colonial governments should be maintained, which inherently contradicts any hint that Davies may have favored a revolt of the Virginia government against England during the time of his ministry.

Davies showed a strong tendency to turn to England for support in his struggle for toleration in that, when asked by the Synod of New York to travel to England to raise funds for the College of New Jersey, he immediately planned to use the trip to gain supporters in his struggle to acquire licensure for meetinghouses outside Hanover, for he wrote that “the dissenters in Virginia lie under such intolerable restraints, that it is necessary to seek a redress.” Davies continued, “When I consider that there is so much Need to make some Attempts for the Security and Enlargement of the Privileges of the Dissenters in Virginia...I cannot but conclude that it is with a View to this that Providence has directed the Trustees [of the College of New Jersey] to make application to me” to travel to Britain seeking funds.\textsuperscript{46} While in England and Scotland, Davies frequently pursued advice on increased toleration for Virginia Presbyterians from Anglican and Church of Scotland leaders, legal experts, royal officials, and groups of English dissenters. For example, Davies met with Jasper Maudit, “the hearty Friend of

\textsuperscript{45} Rachal, 61.

the Dissenters in Virginia....He promised me that Something farther, if possible, should be done in their behalf, before my Return." And, a committee of legal experts friendly to the dissenting cause “appointed some of their Members to assist me in drawing up the Petition; and I intend to wait on them as soon as possible for that End.”

Between July 1753 and April 1754, Davies traveled throughout Britain to raise money for the College of New Jersey and to seek recognition of British laws which would alleviate restrictions on Virginia’s Presbyterians. Although his efforts to secure support from English evangelical dissenters were initially unsuccessful, these dissenters suggested he contact the Bishop of London. Davies composed a letter and sent it to English dissenters, whom he advised to use their own judgment in determining whether they thought the letter was appropriate; his friends decided not to deliver the letter, and it never reached the bishop. In the letter, Davies eloquently pleaded his case in favor of licensure in multiple counties, but he maintained a respectful tone toward the bishop and deferred to his wisdom and experience, in addition to earnestly declaring loyalty to “a government whose clemency I have reason to acknowledge with the most loyal gratitude.” Presbyterian leaders continued to assert their legitimacy in the face of increasing intolerance resulting from growing unrest and suspicion of dissenters by the ruling elite. In addition to reiterating their loyalty and their rejection of the styles of worship perceived as so dangerous by the Anglican establishment, Presbyterians further

47 Pilcher, *Samuel Davies Abroad*, 49.
sought to distance themselves from other dissenting groups by downplaying the extent to
which they dissented; for example, Davies placed his own faith on the same level as
Anglicans when he wrote, "If I am prejudiced in favour of any church...it is of that
established in Scotland; of which I am a member in the same sense that the Established
Church in Virginia is the Church of England."\(^{52}\)

As early as 1752, Hanover Presbytery's leaders worked to quell concerns of
Virginia and British officials that Presbyterians were actively working against the
Anglican clergy, protesting that, unlike other dissenting groups, Presbyterians felt
nothing but loyalty and respect toward England's governing structures and were free
from the dangerous emotionalism and outspoken criticism demonstrated by leaders of
other sects. In his letter to the Bishop of London, Davies rejected disrespectful remarks
and unpredictable behavior of George Whitefield, the well-known itinerant preacher,
while attempting to justify the purpose of his ministry:

Your lordship huddles me promiscuously with the Methodists, as though I were of
their party. I am not ashamed to own that I look upon Mr. Whitefield as a zealous
and successful minister of Christ....I hope you are both good men: and if my
affection to him proves me one of his party, I hope your lordship will conclude
me one of your own too: yet I am far from approving sundry steps in Mr.
Whitefield's first public conduct....The eruptions of his first zeal were, in many
instances, irregular; his regulating his conduct so much by impulses, &c., was
enthusiastic.\(^{53}\)

In closing the letter, Davies reinforced his spirit of catholicism by deemphasizing
his own dissent from the established church and focusing on the spiritual and religious
heritage they both shared. Davies seemed to imply that, although he belonged to a
congregation other than the Church of England, he did not offer any judgment on which

\(^{52}\) Foote, *Sketches of Virginia* 1st Series, 202-3.

\(^{53}\) Foote, *Sketches of Virginia* 1st Series, 199.
system was the true religion and which was false: “May the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls shed the richest blessings of his providence and grace upon you; and long continue your lordship to be consumed in pious services for the Church of God!”\textsuperscript{54}

At all times, Davies displayed the utmost respect and deference for English authorities and recognized that his cause depended upon him gaining favor with the establishment rather than revolting against it. It is also revealing to note that Davies appealed to powerful English officials for support. In doing so, Davies was bypassing the unfriendly Virginia government because he believed that the English government exercised supreme authority over the colonial governments. Davies never questioned English rights of government, but rather operated on the assumption that the colonial governments should be completely subject to England.

Davies’ most ardent support of the English and colonial governments came during the French and Indian War. During the war, Davies acted as one of Virginia’s successful recruiters, preaching action from his pulpit. In his first patriotic sermon, Davies hails the English government and monarchy as compared to “popish” France:

I think it may be truly said that the constitution of the British government is the happiest in all the world....No man is disturbed in his liberty, his property, or conscience; nor subjected to the capricious pleasure of the greatest man in the kingdom. I may also safely affirm, that of all the kings in Europe, or perhaps in the world, our gracious sovereign is the most tender of the liberties of his subjects, and zealous for the constitution of his country....Never was a king’s government more firmly established in the hearts and affections of his subjects....And now, by way of contrast, let us take a view of the French government, and of our wretched circumstances if we should fall under it.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Foote, \textit{Sketches of Virginia} 1\textsuperscript{st} Series, 200.

Davies used his sermons to assert the dissenters’ loyalty to Great Britain in a time of uncertainty and to praise the admirable qualities of the British system of government, in whose good will the Hanover dissenters depended for security.

After the defeat of General Braddock at Fort Duquesne in 1755, invasion of the Shenandoah Valley by French and Indian troops seemed imminent. Davies admonished his parishioners, “Let us show ourselves worthy of protection and encouragement, by our conduct on this occasion.”56 Davies recognized that, in that time of crisis, the safety of the Hanoverians was completely reliant upon their loyalty to Britain. The British government realized the value of the dissenting populations along the frontier in Virginia and made every effort to encourage them to stay to provide a line of defense. The government was also keenly aware of Davies’ patriotic efforts during the war and eased restrictions on licensure, itinerancy, and other measures. As a result, greater numbers of New Lights flocked to Hanover and other points on the frontier, helping the dissenting movement to flourish.57 Because dissenters along the frontier bore the brunt of most of the attacks during the war, led valiantly by New Light clergy, the dissenters gained favor for the New Lights while discrediting Anglican clergy.58

Davies deeply felt that spiritual concerns were at the root of the looming threat of war, and he zealously encouraged his parishioners to join the fight against any invading French or Indian armies as an act of both spiritual calling and patriotism as Britons. In almost puritanical fashion, Davies admonished his Virginians and Britons for not relying


57 Pilcher, Apostle of Dissent, 159; Gewehr, 99.

58 Pilcher, Apostle of Dissent, 163.
upon God for protection rather than turning first to worldly defenses and claimed that the colony’s misfortunes were due to sin and lack of faith on the part of Virginians. He declared, “We ought not indeed to content ourselves with lazy prayers; it is our duty also to take all the measures in our power to prevent or escape the impending ruin of our country; but it is certainly our duty to humble ourselves before that God whom we have offended, and to cry mightily to him, if peradventure, he may yet have mercy upon us that we perish not.”

Davies directly associated the taking up of arms with religious duty. He preached, “Something must be done! must be done by you! Therefore, instead of assuming the state of patriots and heroes at home—to arms!...It is not enough for you to undertake this work: you are also obliged faithfully to perform it, as the work of the Lord.”

Finally, Davies accused his fellow Virginians of disloyalty to Great Britain and unfaithfulness to the church because of their reticence to join the battle: “And shall these ravages go unchecked? Shall Virginia incur the guilt, and the everlasting shame, of tamely exchanging her liberty, her religion, and her all, for arbitrary Gallic power, and for Popish slavery, tyranny, and massacre?...Are Britons utterly degenerated by so short a remove from the mother country?”

Even in the midst of repeated attacks upon communities on the frontier, Davies continually asserted his loyalty to the British government, linking the safety of the settlers with their loyalty to Great Britain and their spiritual responsibility to take up arms in her protection.

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In his patriotic sermons during the French and Indian War, Davies often used words such as liberty, freedom, justice, and natural rights, which suggest the Enlightenment ideals which were embedded in the doctrine of the Revolution. However, Davies uses this vocabulary not to promote political and social equality or liberty, but rather to exclusively protect dissenting practices promised in religious toleration. In his sermons, Davies rarely alluded to any public or political issues, with the exception of the French and Indian War. Davies deliberately remained aloof from these discussions, and his only political activity was directly linked with his campaign to increase dissenters’ abilities to operate within the law. Davies contended that dissenters had the “legal as well as natural right to follow their judgment.”

Davies’ and other Presbyterian ministers’ use of the rhetoric which was later used so heavily during the Revolution is indicative of their education steeped in Calvinist and Scottish Enlightenment theories. For example, they strongly believed in the supremacy of the Bible as an authority on God’s will and maintained that this divine law, established through a covenant between God and man, superseded all worldly governments and laws. This concept, albeit with a Deist rather than Calvinist turn of phrase, appeared during the Revolution in the form of the Enlightenment concept of natural laws and divine rights. Although dissenters used these philosophies and ideas to justify their cause before earthly rulers, they applied them only to religious grounds and did not use them to challenge those rulers’ authority.

Davies’ only political involvement in Virginia was his struggle to secure a license to preach at several meetinghouses. He was so opposed to secular political involvement that he preached against other clergymen getting involved. As he warned fellow church

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63 Baldwin, 55.
leaders, “Our ends are not to relieve captives, to heal the sick, to supply the necessitous, or to diffuse streams of temporal felicity around us....But the ends of our function are infinitely more important and benevolent: to reclaim obstinate rebels to a due subjection to the King of Kings.”

Davies made it clear to his colleagues that he believed that the spiritual realm was the only proper sphere for clergymen, and he also advocated that lay church members focus on the spiritual aspects of life rather than become distracted and weighed down with earthly concerns. Not only did Davies eschew earthly political conflict, he expressed disgust when he learned that other people associated his ministry with rejection of British institutions. Throughout his ministry in Virginia, Davies struggled with the assumption by others that, because he belonged to a dissenting sect, he was therefore uneducated and negligent of established laws and customs. For example, in a letter answering the concerns of Anglican Hanover minister Patrick Henry, Sr., Davies assures Henry:

I am as well satisfied with his present Majesty King George as my Supreme Civil Ruler, as, perhaps, any loyal Subject in all his Majestys Dominions, and accordingly to attest the same, have with the utmost Freedom sworn allegiance to his Majesties Person & Government; & therefore if I be understood to insinuate any thing to the contrary, by the above Explications, I shall be very disingenuously wrong’d. But submitting these things to your Consideration I hope you’ll allow me to be Revd Gentlemen [sic].

Davies struggled with the image of revolt because of his dissenting beliefs, an assumption which still abounds today. Although Davies held religious beliefs and practices which differed from the established Anglican Church, he earnestly and consistently demonstrated his complete obedience and loyalty to the British and colonial

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64 Samuel Davies, “A Sermon Preached Before the Reverend Presbytery of New-Castle, October 11, 1752,” quoted in McAmis, 39.

65 “Letters of Patrick Henry, Sr.,” 270. Patrick Henry, Sr. was the uncle of the well-known Revolutionary orator, Patrick Henry, Jr.
governments, and none of his teachings or actions suggest any early revolutionary or rebellious sentiments.

Davies’ final assertion of his loyalty to Great Britain was perhaps also his most memorable, and arguably the most foreboding. After becoming president of New Jersey College, later Princeton, Davies praised the monarch’s benevolence and pointed out that the revivals in Virginia and the other colonies had prospered because of his actions to ensure observance of the toleration laws. In a sermon eulogizing King George II given in 1761, Davies expressed a deeply mournful regret in the death of the monarch, creating an image of the monarch as father of the colonies, and praising him as a loving and kind benefactor. He pondered, “Can the British annals, in the compass of seventeen hundred years, produce a period more favourable to liberty, peace, prosperity, commerce, and religion? In this happy reign, the prerogative meditated no invasions upon the rights of the people; nor attempted to exalt itself above the law.”66 Davies went on to charge his listeners to remain as loyal to his successor, George III:

If the wishes and prayers of every lover of his country, signify any thing, or have any efficacy, George the Third will reign like George the Second. What, then, remains, but that we transfer to him the loyalty, duty, and affection, we were wont to pay to his amiable predecessor? He ascends the throne in the prime of life and vigour, at a juncture more honourable and glorious, than Britain, perhaps, or America, has ever seen. He had early the example of the best of kings before his eyes, as a finished model of government, upon principles truly British.67

Davies extolled George II and expressed his genuine desire to honor George III in the same manner, displaying a deep and genuine sense of loyalty to and pride in Great Britain and her monarch. However, Davies met an untimely death three weeks later, and he was


never to know his fellow colonists’ disappointment in George III’s reign. Clearly, Davies and his New Light followers were far from posing as the predecessors of Virginia’s next generation of revolutionary rebels.
CHAPTER III

THE SPREAD OF NEW LIGHT PRESBYTERIANISM, THE COMING OF REVOLUTION, AND THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

By the time Davies left Virginia for Princeton in 1759, he had left an indelible mark on Virginia Presbyterianism; in forming a separate Hanover Presbytery in 1755, Davies united New Light groups in the Piedmont and Tidewater with Old Light Scotch-Irish settlers populating the Shenandoah Valley and Blue Ridge. As Presbyterianism spread and individual congregations and communities became better organized, Baptist and Methodist groups also appeared in Virginia. Increasingly, Presbyterian groups were forced to redefine their place within Virginia’s religious, social, and political order. As more radical dissenting groups greatly complicated the religious landscape, the American colonies advanced toward revolt. Though more radical Baptists called for complete religious freedom and elimination of established religion in Virginia, for most of the revolutionary period, Presbyterians, instead of questioning the authority of the British or colonial government to impose regulations on the exercise of religion, simply sought a favorable interpretation of those regulations.¹

Throughout the Revolution’s political and military struggles, Virginia Presbyterians became more politically outspoken in their efforts to procure religious toleration and later freedom, using petitions to Virginia’s revolutionary government to link closely the cause of American liberty with freedom of conscience and the ideology and rhetoric of the Enlightenment with spiritual and theological tenets of Calvinism. However, opposition to religious toleration continued to come from local Virginians

¹ Spangler, 67.
rather than from the Church of England or the British government. Even as Presbyterians became revolutionaries, they were reluctant to join Virginia’s Anglican majority against British rule until they were certain they would be equal participants in the new system of government. In the end, rather than fully embrace the radical republicanism of the revolutionary movement, they continued to focus on their spiritual and religious work, and they ultimately associated more closely with the Anglican Church than with other dissenting groups throughout the process of separating Church and State.

The establishment of Hanover Presbytery allowed New Light Presbyterianism to grow throughout the Tidewater and Piedmont regions. Although it was never served by a full-time minister, a group of seventeen residents maintained a meetinghouse in Williamsburg after 1765, when they petitioned the York County Court for dissenting status:

We intend to make use of a House in the City of Williamsburgh Situate on part of a Lott belonging to Mr. George Davenport as a place for the Public Worship of God according to the Practise of Protestant Dissenters of the Presbyterian denomination which we desire may be Registered in the Records of the Court and this Certification we make according to the direction of an Act of Parliament commonly called the Act of Toleration....As we are not able to obtain a Settled Minister we intend this Place at present only for occasional Worship when we have opportunity to hear any legally qualified Minister.²

Mostly tradesmen, the petitioners were from comfortable although not wealthy economic circumstances, and many of them owned one or more slaves. Although they registered themselves as dissenters, they continued to record births, baptisms, and marriages at Bruton Parish Church, and may have also gone to services in order to avoid being fined

for non-attendance. In 1767, the Williamsburg group of dissenters was probably visited by Revered James Waddell, who studied under John Todd in Louisa County and settled permanently to minister on Virginia’s Northern Neck in 1762. Even before Waddell settled there, Scottish settlers had organized a Presbyterian church along with a few English dissenter. Under his care the congregation flourished, and Waddell was influential in Hanover Presbytery’s ministry through the Revolution, when he often preached to departing Continental troops. During the early years of the Revolution, declining health forced him to relocate to the Valley and later Blue Ridge, where he was at home among Scots-Irish Presbyterians settled there.

Although Presbyterians had enjoyed a marked degree of toleration under Gooch’s policy of protection in exchange for allegiance, as the Great Awakening continued to unfold, the rise of other dissenting Protestant groups in Virginia threatened to upset this delicate balance. After Davies’ departure in 1759, the Presbyterian awakening in Virginia stagnated and was revived by more vigorous and radical Methodists and Baptists who, as they spread throughout the colony, replaced Presbyterians as the leaders of Virginia’s Great Awakening. Notorious for their comparatively ill-educated preachers, emotional and zealous style, and increasing popularity among slaves and whites of lower social standing, strong suspicion and scorn among elites resulted in persecution. Like New and Old Light Presbyterians, Baptists were divided into conservative and

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3 Rowe, 26-29.


6 Thompson, 61.
evangelical groups; the former, the Regular Baptists, were active primarily in northern Virginia and were known for being orthodox Calvinists, while the latter, the Separate Baptists, were numerous in the western part of the colony and had Arminian tendencies. Separate Baptists in particular were known for extremes of evangelicalism, and reports of crying, loud shouting, and convulsions during revivals even led some mainstream Virginians to believe they practiced witchcraft. In spite of disapproval from powerful elites, Baptists flourished in Virginia after Davies’ departure.

In addition to the more radical Baptists, the Great Awakening also brought Methodism to Virginia. As Presbyterians and Baptists dissented from the Established Church, Methodists worked to carry out the evangelical revival within the Church itself. By emphasizing Bible study, devotional prayer, and sharing of religious experiences, followers of John Wesley in England hoped to reform the Anglican Church slowly and from within. Although most of Virginia’s clergy rejected the influence of itinerant Methodist preachers, some Anglican ministers welcomed them, especially Methodist sympathizer Devereux Jarratt of Dinwiddie County. In spite of their protestations of loyalty to the Established church, Jarratt and the English itinerant preachers he encouraged were rejected by the Anglican majority because of their similarities to the dissenters. Methodists occupied an interesting position during the revolutionary period, for their apparent criticism of the Church and their incorporation of evangelical elements of the Great Awakening contradicted their official position of outward neutrality with implied loyalism during the Revolution. In fact, Rhys Isaac argues that, “Methodism,

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7 Gewehr, 106-112.


9 Gewehr, 148-49.
through its veiled pacifism, may nevertheless have served as a subconscious means of popular protest against gentry-led republicanism.”

Inactive in the flurry of petitions for religious toleration which characterized the Baptist and Presbyterian response to the movement toward independence, the Methodists only organized as a separate denomination in 1784 after total separation from Great Britain was complete.

Baptists in particular were a problem for Presbyterians trying to dispel the perception that dissenters were wild, seditious, and disloyal. While Presbyterians deliberately cast themselves as equal and loyal participants in Virginia’s dominant social and political structures while practicing a similar and equally established religion and were “particularly careful to keep lines of communication open with the Anglican Church,” in contrast, Baptists “tended to describe themselves as a people apart from the dominant order, as God’s chosen elect...[and by] placing their faith in dramatic contrast to the wicked ways of the Anglican world.”

Similarly, systems of church government demonstrated the sharp contrast between Baptist and Presbyterian groups. In most ways quite similar to Anglican governance, Presbyterian groups were organized into a strict hierarchy, with clergy and presbyteries speaking for the entire church body.

Just as the Anglican Church functioned as a center for community and the imposition of status and order within Virginia society, the Presbyterian structures “operated to indoctrinate converts with important lessons in social inequality and keeping their place, which could only have helped them to perform as citizens.” In contrast, “Anglican and Presbyterian institutions [were] anathema to the Baptists,” who considered

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12 Spangler, 66, 120.
the Bible the only authority on behavior and worship and who, like early Puritans, empowered individual congregations to govern themselves. Because of their conviction that only in free worship without strict liturgy or government regulation could God be worshipped truly faithfully, Baptists were the earliest and most outspoken proponents for full religious freedom in Virginia. In their outward rejection of Church structures, Baptists defied the cornerstones of the system of paternalism and deference which formed the basis for planters’ power and authority. However, Presbyterian forms of government and organization “did not undermine planter society so much as shore it up...[by training] Virginians in the important lessons of social deference, hierarchy, and submission that were fundamental” to the operation of the colony.

As the Revolution approached, perceptions of dissenters continued to be mixed, depending greatly on observers’ background, experience, and stake in establishment religion or society. Philip Vickers Fithian, himself a Presbyterian educated at Princeton, recorded in his 1774 diary a disparity between Baptists and Presbyterians in Virginia in the journal he kept while tutoring the children of wealthy planter Robert Carter III. Fithian noted, “the Anabaptists in Louden [sic] County...seem to be increasing in affluence....They are numerous in many County’s in this Province & are Generally accounted troublesome—Parson Gibbern has preached several Sermons in opposition to them, in which he has labour’d to convince his People that what they say are only whimsical Fancies or at most Religion grown to Wildness & Enthusiasm!” In contrast, he observed “There is also in these counties one Mr Woddel [Waddell], a presbiterian

13 Spangler, 67, 78-79.

14 Ragosta, 230.

15 Spangler, 68.
Clergyman, of an irreproachable Character....The people in general don’t more esteem [him] than the Anabaptists Preachers; but the People of Fashion in general countenance & commend him....Mr & Mrs Carter speak well of him, Mr & Mrs Fantleroy also, & all who I have ever heard mention his Name.”

The spread of Baptist preaching and teaching seemed to improve the position of Presbyterians somewhat because of the striking differences in their worship and in the demeanor of their clergy and congregants. For example, Baptists had no educational standards for ministers, while Presbyterians required university graduates, most of whom attended the College of New Jersey, giving them the same intellectual and cultural background as the Anglican clergy and native elites. Similarly, while Baptist preaching tended to attract dispossessed or downtrodden individuals of lower social and economic status, Presbyterianism had a broader appeal, and some of the New Lights’ first converts in the Piedmont were men of independent means, many of whom owned slaves and were able to contribute land and materials for the erection of meetinghouses, which allowed the Presbyterian revival to become so well-established in its early stages. When compared to the more emotional and outspoken Baptists, Presbyterian clergy and congregants, already well-established in Virginia’s social and political landscape, became much more respectable in the eyes of Anglican clergy and powerful gentry.

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17 Thompson, 66.

18 Spangler, 53.

However, Baptists’ more radical and seemingly anti-social behavior also damaged Presbyterians’ image in that those in power, especially Anglican clergy and the politically powerful gentry, used the Baptists’ example to argue against any religious toleration. James Madison, in a 1774 letter to a colleague in Philadelphia, recounted that, during a debate on religious toleration in the House of Burgesses, “such incredible and extravagant stories were told...of the monstrous effects of the enthusiasm prevalent among the sectaries, and so greedily swallowed by their enemies, that I believe they lost footing by it.” Those opposing toleration were “too much devoted to ecclesiastical establishment,” and “that liberal, catholic, and equitable way of thinking, as to the rights of conscience...is little known among the zealous adherents to our hierarchy.” Baptist preachers also were frequently arrested and jailed because of their refusal to obtain licensure before engaging in itinerant preaching, one of the requirements of the Toleration Act.\footnote{20}{James, 36-37.}

By 1776, as the Revolution’s political conflicts escalated with the colonies’ declaration of independence from British rule, dissenters in Virginia all recognized the opportunity for applying the principles of the political conflict in order to improve their abilities to practice their faith. Although Presbyterians already enjoyed nearly complete religious toleration under the 1689 Toleration Act, they were still not permitted to preach without license or perform marriage ceremonics, and they continued to pay taxes to support the Established Church; the Revolution offered an opportunity for converting

\footnote{21}{Ragosta, 229-234. See Lewis Peyton Little, \textit{Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia} (Lynchburg, Virginia: J.P. Bell Co., Inc., 1938).}
religious toleration into religious freedom. However, even with the advantage of a larger body of well-educated clergymen familiar with the rhetoric of the Scottish enlightenment and its application to Calvinist theology, Presbyterians, especially New Light groups in the Piedmont and Tidewater, lagged behind the Baptists in their demands for complete religious freedom.

Within Hanover Presbytery, distinct cultural, theological, and historical backgrounds caused the Scots-Irish Presbyterians in the Valley and English and Scottish Presbyterians in the Piedmont and Tidewater to react to the revolutionary crisis quite differently. At the earliest moments of the pre-revolutionary crisis, Scots-Irish Presbyterians were outspoken in their unwillingness to compromise with British demands; in 1775, congregations in Augusta and Abingdon issued petitions, independently of Hanover, indicating their determination “never to surrender [liberties] to any power on earth, but at the expense of our lives.” In general, Scots-Irish Presbyterians in Virginia harbored dislike for English government structures, since many had migrated to North America in order to escape ostracization at the hands of English Anglicans, or were banished to the colonies by English authorities when they did not convert to Anglicanism during the seventeenth century. Scots-Irish individuals who suffered or whose ancestors suffered under British rule had little difficulty joining in the Revolutionary cause.

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22 Thompson, 59.

23 Thompson, 89.


In stark contrast, ethnically English leaders within Hanover Presbytery, in addition to English and Scottish congregants in the Piedmont and Tidewater regions, were cautiously conservative in joining the Revolution. Although most Presbyterians in Virginia supported the Revolution by 1776 as the military conflict was well underway and the colonies had declared their complete independence from the Crown, during the 1760s and early 1770s, they remained wary of the economic and political upheaval which would result from complete separation. This trend was especially true in the Piedmont and upper Tidewater, where many Presbyterians were well-established in trade and so looked for a compromise which would appease both colonists and Crown.  

One significant source of conservatism and even loyalism within Presbyterian communities in the Piedmont and Tidewater was the presence of Scottish Presbyterian merchants. As settlement of the Piedmont intensified, English merchants and ship captains as well as Tidewater gentry were reluctant to move away from their system of tobacco export, which relied on patronage, credit, and water-based transportation. In order to export tobacco from further inland, farmers turned to Scottish merchants who established warehouses along Virginia’s fall line and offered new lines of credit. These Scottish merchants brought to the region “an evangelical tradition and evangelistic desire that had great influence in encouraging revival in the Piedmont,” and “the congregations in the Piedmont became outposts of Scottish piety.” For example, Scottish tobacco merchant Neil Jamieson stressed honesty and hard work, ideas at the core of the Protestant work ethic, advising his nephew to “be as Obliging as in [your]

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\(^{26}\) Balmer, 34.  
\(^{27}\) Lambert, 138.  
\(^{28}\) Payne, 688.
Power... [and] weight a matter thoroughly before you venture to dispute, and even if you are right, do not glory too much in having the advantage.”

Scottish merchants brought Scottish Presbyterian ideas, traditions, and culture directly to the frontier regions of Virginia and “were active participants in a great ‘evangelical network’ that made the Great Awakening a truly international affair.”

Presbyterians and people of Scottish origin were known for their outspoken loyalty to the British government. In May 1776, during John Witherspoon’s first pro-Revolutionary statement delivered from the pulpit, he explained “that the name ‘Scotch’ is becoming a term of reproach ‘these days,’ because it is felt that the American Scots are far less concerned for liberty than are the colonists from England and Ireland.”

Similarly, colonists publicly denounced Scots and closely associated them with Britain’s oppressive policies. In the Virginia Gazette, “Virginianus” railed against Scots:

I. What nation was it that twice joined the French in the plan for abolishing the protestant religion, therefore invited the pretender over to Britain, and then assisted him with all their might to usurp the government of England by force, thereby to subject all true protestants to popish persecution, or death? Why it was the rebellious Scotch.

II. Who was it that planned the ruin of American liberty by framing and instituting the stamp act, together with the rest of those most odious and oppressive revenue acts for imposing a tax on the Americans, without their consent? Why the Scotch.

III. Who was it that so far abused the power and authority entrusted with them in a deluded k—g, as to perpetrate the enforcing the said acts, by sending fleets and armies to distress loyal subjects in America? Why the Scotch.

IV. Whose influence over a corrupt parliament was it that has shaken the very constitution of England by disannulling the almost unanimous election of the freeholders of Middlesex? Why the Scotch.

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30 Baldwin, 687.

31 Trinterud, 249.
V. Who are they that are now aiming at arbitrary and tyrannic power in almost every part of the English dominions? Why are they not the Scotch?

VI. Why then every American who joins with the Scotch, in opposition against his own countrymen, ought to be deemed an enemy to liberty and his country, and therefore should forever be despised and discountenanced by every one who values his property or his freedom.32

Indeed, most Scottish merchants and many of their customers and associates remained loyal throughout the Revolution, contributing to the loyalist exodus from the United States after the war.33 According to Keith Mason, Lowland and Highland Scots constituted a major part of the post-Revolution loyalist diaspora.34 For example, Scottish merchant James Parker returned to Scotland after the close of the Revolutionary War, and his network of Scottish contacts there allowed him to reintegrate himself easily. His son, Patrick, returned to Virginia in 1785 in an attempt to establish himself as a merchant. Significantly, Patrick was unsuccessful in his ventures because his father’s business associates in Virginia had also fled.35 Scottish Presbyterians grew unpopular in the years leading up to the Revolution, and this dislike intensified when they supported the loyalist cause.36

In the early years of the Revolution, Virginia’s New Light Presbyterians remained a solidly conservative force, reluctant at first to fully participate in the revolt. As late as 1775, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, instructed its constituents to remain loyal to the British government, albeit acknowledging the conflict between royal governance

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33 Dobson, 148.


35 Mason, 249-250.

36 Dobson, 153.
and parliamentary authority. In its May 1775 Pastoral Letter, the Synod urged caution in entering into any conflict:

We have ardently wished that [this unhappy difference] could...have been more early accommodated....It is well known to you...that we have not been instrumental inflaming the minds of the people, or urging them to acts of violence and disorder....Let every opportunity be taken to express your attachment and respect to our sovereign King George....The present opposition to the measures of administration does not in the least arise from the disaffection to the king, or a desire of separation from the parent state....[We pray] that the present unnatural dispute may be speedily terminated by an equitable and lasting settlement on constitutional principles.  

Echoing the official position of the Synod, the leadership of Hanover Presbytery issued its first petition in 1775, referring to themselves as “His Majesty’s dissenting Protestant subjects.” In contrast, a 1775 Baptist petition to the House of Burgesses asks permission for ministering to Continental Army soldiers engaged in the fight for independence.

The nature, language, and meaning of their earliest petitions for religious toleration exhibited Virginia New Light Presbyterians’ unwillingness to challenge the authority of the religious and political establishments, but rather their continuing campaign to improve their ability to carry out their religious practices within the social, political, and structural status quo. In 1772, after receiving several petitions from Baptists responding to increased jailing of itinerant preachers, the House of Burgesses drew a Toleration Act specific to Virginia which adopted the principles and provisions of the 1689 act while including additional restrictions on meeting at night or behind closed doors.

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38 James, 41.

39 Spangler, 219.
doors, or proselytizing slaves without their masters’ permission.40 Although the 1772 toleration bill never passed because of political gridlock and strong objection from Baptists, in 1774 the Hanover Presbytery issued a response which outlined objections to the 1772 bill, calling for “equal liberties and advantages with their fellow-subjects.”41 Although protesting the toleration bill’s unequal restrictions on dissenters versus Anglicans, the 1774 Presbyterian petition still called for toleration rather than outright liberty by reiterating their willingness “that all clergymen should be required to take the oaths of allegiance....Likewise, as is required in the said bill, we shall willingly have all our churches and stated places for publish workshop registered, if this honorable House shall think proper to grant it.”42 In agreeing to terms which continued to place dissenters under regulatory restrictions, the Hanover Presbytery sought to compromise with the Church rather than disestablish it. Although it is tempting to read the radical language of the Revolution into the phrase “equal liberties and advantages” appearing in the petition, in this case the plural use of “liberties” and its placement with “advantages” refers to specific privileges, not the Enlightenment concept of Liberty.

After the Continental Congress’ adoption of the Declaration of Independence, Virginia Presbyterians joined their peers in support of the Revolution. However, rather than participate in the radical forefront of the revolutionary movement, Presbyterians maintained their moderate tone in following the revolution’s leadership. Throughout the Revolution’s military conflict and the political process of establishing and independent Virginia government, Presbyterians focused on their place within Virginia’s new

40 Isaac, “The Rage of Malice,” 143.
41 James, 41.
42 James, 43.
religious scene. Briefly, radical language appeared in 1776 in petitions from Baptists and from the Hanover Presbytery, but their appeals came in support of language inserted by James Madison into George Mason’s Declaration of Rights, which proclaimed that “all men are equally entitled to a free exercise of religion.” In response to the hopes raised in the language of the declaration, the Hanover Presbytery’s 1776 petition referred to the ideological basis for the revolutionary struggle and its applicability to religious liberty; while the conflict “laid this continent under the necessity of casting off the yoke of tyranny and of forming independent government upon equitable and liberal foundations, they [dissenters] flatter themselves they shall be freed from all the encumbrances which a spirit of domination, prejudice, or bigotry hath interwoven with most other political systems.” The petition continued, aligning their request for religious freedom with the colonies’ complaint of taxation without representation, for dissenters objected to “large taxes to support an establishment from which their consciences and principles oblige them to dissent, all which are so many violations of their natural rights.”

Hanover’s petition continued in its support for religious freedom, advocating total disestablishment of the Anglican Church, basing their argument on Calvinist theology: “When our blessed Saviour declares his kingdom is not of this world, he renounces all dependence upon State power....The only proper objects of civil government are the happiness and protection of men in the present state of existence.” Although the language of liberty had long been used in sermons, hymns, and other religious settings,

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43 James Madison, Letters and Other Writings of James Madison, Fourth President of the United States, Published by Order of Congress, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1865), 24n; Buckley, 106.

44 James, 71.

45 James, 72.
the 1776 petitions were the first calls for full religious liberty in a political setting. Virginia’s Presbyterians echoed the language, ideology, and sentiments of the Declaration of Rights and the Declaration of Independence, but this call first came from Madison and Jefferson as a product of their Enlightenment political theories rather than from the religious convictions of the dissenters themselves. By the close of 1776, dissenters’ petitions to the Virginia legislature, in addition to the actions of liberal politicians such as Madison and Jefferson, resulted in dissenting ministers being placed in the same ranks with Anglican clergy in the military, and the exemption of dissenters from taxes supporting the Anglican Church. However, the Anglican Church was still firmly established as the state religion. In his autobiography, Jefferson wrote of the resulting debates that “although the majority of our citizens were dissenters, as has been observed, a majority of the Legislature were churchmen….Our opponents carried…a declaration that religious assemblies out to be regulated, and that provision ought to be made for continuing the succession of the clergy, and superintending their conduct.”

In Virginia, New Light Presbyterian leaders only joined anti-British and anti-Establishment movements after Virginia and the Continental Congress had declared their independence of the British government, possibly because they considered themselves bound by the Presbytery’s original agreement with Governor Gooch, pledging allegiance and loyalty in the government in return for recognition under the Toleration Act:

Not until the Revolution was accomplished, and Virginia had thrown off the allegiance to Great Britain, did they…strike hands with the Baptists in an effort to pull down the Establishment. Being no longer subjects of King George, but

46 James, 83.

citizens of Virginia, they were absolved from their oaths and were free to act according to their judgment and interests under the new government.  

Indeed, in their 1775 petition, the Presbytery opened by recounting the Presbyterians' long history of cooperation with royal governors, especially noting that "the honorable Governor Gooch, with the advice the Council, did, in the year 1738...grant an instrument of writing under the seal of the colony, containing the most ample assurances that they should enjoy the full and free exercise of their religion, and all the other privileges of good subjects."  

Virginia's Presbyterian leadership was also hesitant to become involved politically in the mainstream movement toward revolution because of their consciousness of the incongruity between the revolutionary rhetoric of the gentry republicans and their continued unwillingness to grant religious freedom. For example, Jon Butler argues that support for the Revolutionary movement was often reluctant or non-existent among dissenting Protestant sects, because, ironically, the revolutionaries were usually those who had mistreated religious minorities in the past. Dissenters, against whose religious ambitions republican majorities had used legal technicalities to curtail, "found the patriots' anti-Parliament protests ironic and even hypocritical." John Ragosta asserts that "to the extent that their Anglican compatriots were fighting for civil liberties, dissenters were painfully aware of their political disabilities....The religious petitions

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48 James, 24-25.
49 James, 42.
50 Butler, Awash in a Sea of Faith, 205.
suggest that dissenters negotiated for religious freedom in return for their support of the war.”

Virginia’s Presbyterian ministers and leaders only became engaged in political action when it was necessary to promote the free exercise of religion. Just as Samuel Davies lobbied for recognition of the 1689 Toleration Act, Hanover Presbytery’s leadership used the Revolution to their advantage in securing toleration and later freedom. According to Jon Butler, dissenting ministers kept aloof from the upheavals of the turmoil of the 1760s and 1770s, taking a moderate stance only when a stance was necessary at all, and more often calling on their congregants to pray rather than act. Furthermore, dissenting Baptists and Presbyterians all recognized that republican leaders in Virginia were anxious that the dissenting communities would support the war effort fully. Britain, conscious of the religious fragmentation, tried to court dissenters away from rebellion. Rather than eagerly disestablishing the Anglican Church in a wave of republican enthusiasm, “Virginia’s political establishment, with the grudging acquiescence of the established church, slowly accepted religious freedom to the extent it seemed necessary for effective mobilization.”

As the war effort languished after the initial fervor of 1776 subsided, the General Assembly received numerous petitions from Anglicans, complaining of the dangerous concessions made to dissenters in order to boost recruiting, and seeking new restrictions on dissenting groups. In 1777, the Hanover Presbytery issued a petition which

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51 Ragosta, 232.


53 Ragosta, 228.

54 Ragosta, 245-46.
expressed disapproval of, but did not object outright to, a system which would provide state support for all denominations equally. They wrote, "the duty which we owe our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can only be directed by reason and conviction, and is no where cognizable but at the tribunal of the universal Judge.....Neither does the church of Christ stand in need of a general assessment for its support." Rather than champion universal religious freedom, the petition rather weakly requested that "our Legislature would never extend any assessment for religious purposes to us, or to the congregations under our care." Recognizing the difficulty of their economic, religious, and political times, Presbyterian leaders likely moved cautiously in order to gauge future actions by the response they received over their moderate petition.

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson first introduced his Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, which abolished state religion and placed all denominations on equal footing independently of government. At the same time, a competing bill was introduced which would have introduced a general tax to support any Christian religion designated by the tax payer. Neither bill passed, but the dissenters' responses reveal a great deal about their political and religious stance. Petitions from inhabitants of Augusta, Amherst, and Amelia counties, all areas with substantial Scots-Irish populations, indicated that they "highly approve the bill" to establish religious freedom. However, although Presbyterians made up significant portions of those petitions' signers, no communication was made by the Presbytery itself to support or reject either bill, in spite of Jefferson's appeal to them directly for support. Although Jefferson had sent a copy of the bill directly to John Todd, moderator of the Presbytery, neither Todd nor any of the other

55 Foote, Sketches of Virginia 1st Series, 327.
56 James, 92-94.
Presbyterian leadership publicly supported the bill, probably due to internal divisions among the presbytery's members. Unable to reach consensus, they were likely debating the potential advantages of the semi-establishment which the tax assessment would have produced, for they were concerned with "the critical state of religious Affairs, the great variety of Denominations multiplying in the State, the Danger of Extinction of our own Churches, unless some speedy and effectual Means be adopted to prevent the Evil." At such a critical juncture in the process of separating church and state and in establishing religious freedom, the Hanover Presbyteyry's conspicuous silence in their failure to support or reject the competing bills demonstrates their preoccupation with the new state's spiritual future rather than their political status.

After 1777, the Hanover Presbytery remained inactive in Virginia politics, even as republican leaders debated the place of religious toleration and liberty in the new state. In contrast, Baptists became outspoken champions of full religious liberty, asserted through numerous petitions. Presbyterians remained focused on the spiritual rather than temporal effects of the war, anxious over religion's apparent decline throughout the conflict and still emphasizing unrestricted exercise of their own religious mission rather than universal religious liberty. As a result of their growing concerns, Presbyterian leaders seriously considered a rapprochement with Anglicans which would unite the two churches in both religious and educational areas of governance, strengthening religion's position within the new society. In 1779, Samuel Smith, the president of Hampden-Sydney Academy, approached Jefferson, proposing to reunite all Christians in Virginia under one Church which would also control the state's educational institutions.

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Mary and Hampden-Sydney. The Presbytery was silent on the issue of separation of church and state until 1784, when a petition was issued which objected to “invidious and exclusive distinctions, preferences, and emoluments conferred by the State on any one sect above others.” However, it appeared to the presbytery that a bill establishing tax assessment for state support of religion was inevitable, and so later that year, they prepared an assessment plan which called for, among other stipulations establishing a religion maintained by the state, a requirement “that every man, as a good citizen, be obliged to declare himself attached to some religious community, publicly known to profess the belief of one God, his righteous providence, our accountability to him, and a future state of rewards and punishments.” In this startling turn of events, the leadership of Hanover Presbytery, in an effort to gain temporal security, demonstrated their commitment to religious establishment and government, briefly turning their backs against their theological and spiritual beliefs in true worship of God and the principles of universal liberty and freedom of conscience which they were later celebrated for.

Jefferson and Madison reacted bitterly to the Presbytery’s rejection of true religious liberty. For example, Madison wrote of his anger that the Presbyterians were “as ready to set up an establishment which is to take them in as they were to pull down that which shut them out” and also remarked on the “shameful” change between their early petitions and their assessment plan. In the meantime, successful incorporation of the Episcopal Church “stung Presbyterian sensibilities. While the former establishment

58 Buckley, 109.

59 Foote, Sketches of Virginia 1st Series, 333.


61 Letters and Other Writings of James Madison I, 144; Buckley, 113.
had languished during the war years, animosity toward it had also softened; but when
signs of life returned, the latent hostility of its opponents once again surfaced.”62
Jefferson secretly rejoiced, writing to Madison that he was “glad the Episcopalians have
again shown their teeth and fangs. The dissenters have almost forgotten them.”63
Madison’s “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” drawn in
response to growing support for the assessment bill, used the core principles of the
Enlightenment and drew on the language in the Declaration of Independence and
Virginia’s Constitution to argue that free exercise of religion was by nature opposed to
the type of governance embodied in a state, “for it is known that this religion
[Christianity] both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws,
but in spite of every opposition from them.” The “Memorial” was printed and circulated
throughout Virginia, turning much lay opinion against the assessment bill. As a result,
Jefferson’s Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom passed the House of Delegates and
Senate in 1786.64

Throughout the process of separating church and state in Virginia, Hanover
Presbytery exhibited extreme reluctance to truly commit themselves to the principles of
full religious liberty, favoring instead an alteration of the status quo which would modify
circumstances more in their favor. Although they never approved of the social and
political hegemony of the Anglican Church, in the end they also rejected the radical
republicans’ proposals to establish full religious freedom, which would, they foresaw,

62 Buckley, 115.

University Press), 558; Buckley, 115.

64 Letters and Other Writings of James Madison I, 165; Lance Banning, “James Madison, the
Statute for Religious Freedom, and the Crisis of Republican Convictions” in The Virginia Statute for
weaken the state of religion in general. Although Scots-Irish elements within the Presbytery were in favor of total separation, those measures met with reticence from the Presbytery’s English and Scottish leadership. Unlike the Baptists, who “fought for complete separation of Church and State, the Presbyterians were more concerned merely with the removal of religious disabilities;” whereas Baptists sought change of the law, Presbyterians asked for recognition or interpretation of laws which would move in their favor. Just as Samuel Davies and his colleagues limited their political involvement in the 1740s and 50s to actions which would promote their religious purpose, so the Hanover Presbytery’s leadership in the 1760s and 70s focused on the spiritual health of their congregations. They continued to work for religious toleration, but the language and tone of their petitions demonstrate their relative aloofness from the political and ideological foundations of the revolutionary conflict. Although by 1776 they supported the military and political movements toward independence, Virginia’s Presbyterians were far from becoming radical republicans on the forefront of the revolt.

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65 Balmer, 41.

66 Foote, Sketches of Virginia 1\textsuperscript{st} Series, 201-03.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

Most historians, Presbyterians, and Americans have viewed colonial Presbyterians as strong supporters of the colonies' movement toward revolution. Linking Presbyterians' religious principles and ethnic background with the tradition of America's solid founding on Protestant theology, ideology, and work ethic has resulted in the denomination's central place within the narrative on the winning of American liberty. Presbyterians in the new Republic, Antebellum society nervously tottering on the brink of civil war, and America as it struggled to place itself within a global system of exploration, trade, and conquest, all sought to link their own ethnic and religious identities with the larger narrative of American history and culture. Varying nostalgic, scientific, and social modes of examining history have all placed religion at the forefront of interpreting the origins of the Revolution.

In Virginia, complex social, political, and cultural factors created a unique system of church-state relations which challenge the narrative of Presbyterians as revolutionary leaders. Supported through the collection of universal taxes and mandated through attendance laws, the Church of England reigned as Virginia's dominant religion. As an arm of the state, the Church was the primary means of marking birth, baptism, marriage, and death in colonial Virginia. Parish churches also acted as cornerstones of individual communities by functioning as centers of trade and social life. Anglican vestries, dominated by local wealthy landowning elites, exerted an enormous influence in each community's moral, legal, and social worlds. As the Great Awakening sparked religious
revivals throughout the colonies, the growth of a dissenting Presbyterian group centered in Hanover created controversy and tension with Virginia’s governing elite. Viewed as a challenge to their social and political hegemony, Virginia’s planter class blocked measures of the early Hanover Presbyterians, led by Samuel Davies, to establish the right to practice a dissenting religion freely under the terms of England’s 1689 Toleration Act.

Although thwarted by native Virginians, Presbyterians met with a more marked degree of toleration and respect from royal governors and other officials who recognized the Toleration Act’s applicability in the colony. In applying to colonial governors, Anglican leaders in England, and prominent dissenters in the mother country, these Presbyterians strengthened their cultural, legal, political, and spiritual ties with those of England rather than challenging England’s hold on the colonies. Further, Davies and his congregation repeatedly asserted their loyalty to local Virginia structures of government, dominated by both local elites and officials from England, and their commitment to upholding those rulers’ authority over them. Rather than acting as a destabilizing influence which challenged the system of deference and hierarchy which characterized Virginia’s tobacco society, Presbyterians’ teachings and actions reinforced that hierarchy, the centrality of the Anglican Church in Virginia’s political and social landscapes, and Virginia’s system of slavery.

Throughout the colonial revolutionary eras, Presbyterians consistently demonstrated their conservative approach to politics. Most importantly, for them, any foray into politics required a higher religious or spiritual purpose. In lobbying for a reinterpretation of the Toleration Act as it applied to Virginia, they sought to render the law more favorable to their own practices rather than changing the law to allow
unrestricted religious liberty. As opposed to Baptists, whose theology demanded that only worship under conditions of full religious liberty could be pleasing to God, Presbyterians sought ways in which they could adapt existing Anglican structures or toleration laws to suit their own needs, especially in arguing the necessity of licensure for preachers at multiple meetinghouses. As the Revolution commenced, rather than using the ideology of the revolt to argue for religious liberty, Presbyterians used their support as leverage for improved toleration. Although they remained part of the mainstream struggle for independence, their involvement fell far short of leading the religious, political, or ideological foundations of the Revolution.

The disparity between Virginia republicans’ argument for political liberty for themselves but denial of religious liberty for others was probably the strongest factor in the Hanover Presbyterians’ lack of enthusiastic support for the revolutionary movement. Ironically, true religious liberty and total separation of church and state was achieved by Deist Thomas Jefferson and theories of the French Enlightenment, not by Presbyterian activists guided by theological or spiritual principles. Discouraged by the apparent decline of religion in the colonies during the Revolution’s military conflict, Presbyterians finally sought the power and prestige of the Anglican Church, as their avenue to survival, ultimately placing their spiritual and religious mission above the political principles which characterized the Revolutionary Age.
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