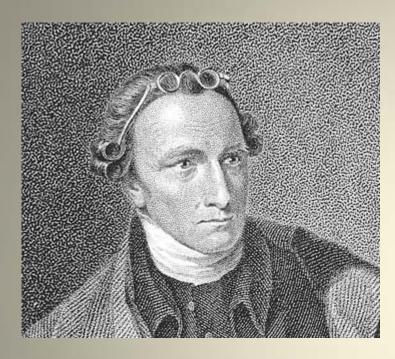
## Early Virginians and

## Religious Taxation

Compiled By Katherine Atkinson April, 2007



#### Patrick Henry

Stipple engraving by Leney, after Thomas Sully Published by J. Webster, 1817, Copyprint Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-4907) Library of Congress (134)

In 1779 the Virginia Assembly deprived Church of England ministers of tax support.

Patrick Henry's response to the 1779 Virginia Assembly's denial of tax support to the Church of England was a bill for general religious assessment in 1784.

Henry's bill was close to passage when the Assembly elected him governor of Virginia, which ended his ability to promote passage of bills.

The tactic succeeded in preventing passage of the general religious assessment bill.

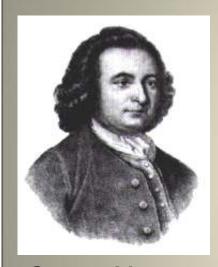
#### An Appeal for Tax-Supported Religion

- •The debate in Virginia in 1785 over religious taxation produced an unprecedented outpouring of petitions to the General Assembly.
- •A petition from supporters of Patrick Henry's bill in Surry County declares that "the Christian Religion is conducive to the happiness of Societies."
- •They assert that:
- "True Religion is most friendly to social and political Happiness— That a conscientious Regard to the approbation of Almighty God lays the most effectual restraint on the vicious passions of Mankind affords the most powerful incentive to the faithful discharge of every social Duty and is consequently the most solid Basis of private and public Virtue is a truth which has in some measure been acknowledged at every Period of Time and in every Corner of the Globe."

#### A Proposal for Tax-Supported Religion for Virginia

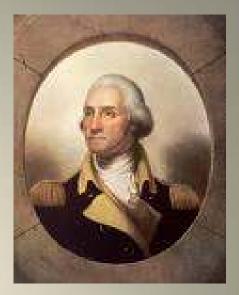
- •Patrick Henry's general assessment bill was similar to those passed in the New England states.
- •In 1785, a considerable opposition had been developed to Henry's bill.
- •The bill levied a tax for the support of religion but permitted individuals to earmark their taxes for the church of their choice.
- •The bill met with stiff opposition led by several prominent members of the Virginia General Assembly, and a decision was made to postpone consideration of the bill until the fall 1785 session of the legislature.
- •Postponing the bill allowed opponents to mobilize and defeat it.
- •Leading the forces for postponement was James Madison.
- •Voting against postponement and, therefore, in support of a general tax for religion was the future Chief Justice of the United States,
- ·John Marshall.

## **George Washington in Support of Tax-Supported Religion**

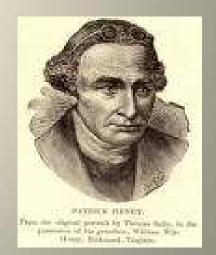


George Mason

In a letter George Washington informs his friend and neighbor, George Mason, in the midst of the public agitation over Patrick Henry's general assessment bill, that he does not, in principle, oppose "making people pay towards the support of that which they profess," although he considers it "impolitic" to pass a measure that will disturb public tranquility.



George Washington



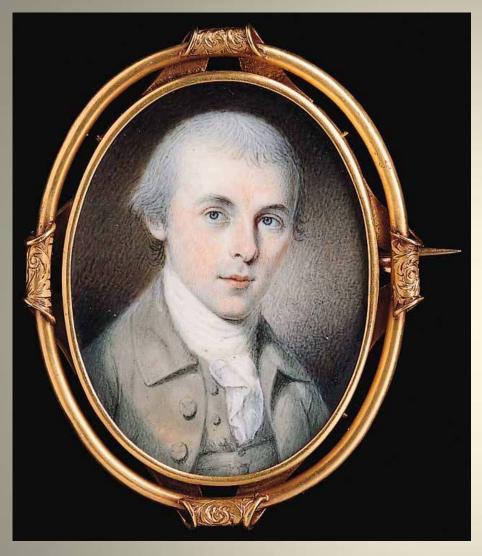
Patrick Henry

### **Another Supporter of Tax- Supported Religion**

To also Movember QE 1904 Torseed going greatle letter the day often mine of the 20 Tradavit had been disposeded thank you do for the were particular, and satisfactor of information that you have sided in with It is estainly comfortable to home hat the Legislature of our country is on gaged in boneficial purviete. for Jamesene that the year Of referrent, and a wise digest of our militia law are very exportant concurry: He me to secure one peace and the other one morals. Refine may weave as five a web of scaren as they please but the experience of all lander whom Islagion late the quardian of morale-land he must be a very enalled in the ever in our Country. The door not see that avanceous accomplishing the destination of the grown for went of alcool obtigation to contribute something to its support. The destanation Sight, of reconstone, nother contrate against for ung modes of facts and forms of worship tain against competting contribution for the support of religion in Several & leitly a great with the prosty levens, that love for som ombo Less the Inalisandar and the gooder avenell as the Xn ratigion and upon this liberal ground, Thefer our agree thente conduct themselves, Ibelieve there is no doubt but that the proper lation of our conditing dependermenently upon our levenue Course they therefore demand interes convertionation . It is natural for mon to the from operation to ease, and whilst one taxes are astronely heavy, and Worth Carolina & Georgea hay

Richard Henry Lee supported Patrick Henry's bill because he believed that the influence of religion was the surest means of creating the virtuous citizens needed to make a republican government work. His remark that "refiners may weave as fine a web of reason as they please, but the experience of all times shows religion to be the guardian of morals" appears to be aimed at Thomas Jefferson who, at this point in his career, was thought by other Virginians to believe that sufficient republican morality could be instilled in the citizenry by instructing it solely in history and the classics.

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James Madison

Miniature portrait by Charles Willson Peale, 1783

Rare Book and Special Collections Division
(USZ62-5310)

Library of Congress (135)

James Madison, the leading opponent of government-supported religion, combined both arguments (tax support for churches; separation of government and church) in his celebrated Memorial and Remonstrance.

Madison's principal written contribution to the contest over Henry's general assessment bill was his Memorial and Remonstrance.

Madison's petition has grown in stature over time and is now regarded as one of the most significant American statements on the issue of the relationship of government to religion.

Madison grounded his objection to Henry's bill on the civil libertarian argument that it violated the citizen's "unalienable" natural right to freedom of religion and on the practical argument that government's embrace of religion had inevitably harmed it. Thus, he combined and integrated the two principal arguments used by opponents of Henry's bill

In the fall of 1785, Madison marshaled sufficient legislative support to administer a decisive defeat to the effort to levy religious taxes.

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## THE WORLD RELIGIONS IN RICHMOND PROJECT

http://www.has.vcu.edu/soc/rdr/

By Katherine Atkinson April, 2007