

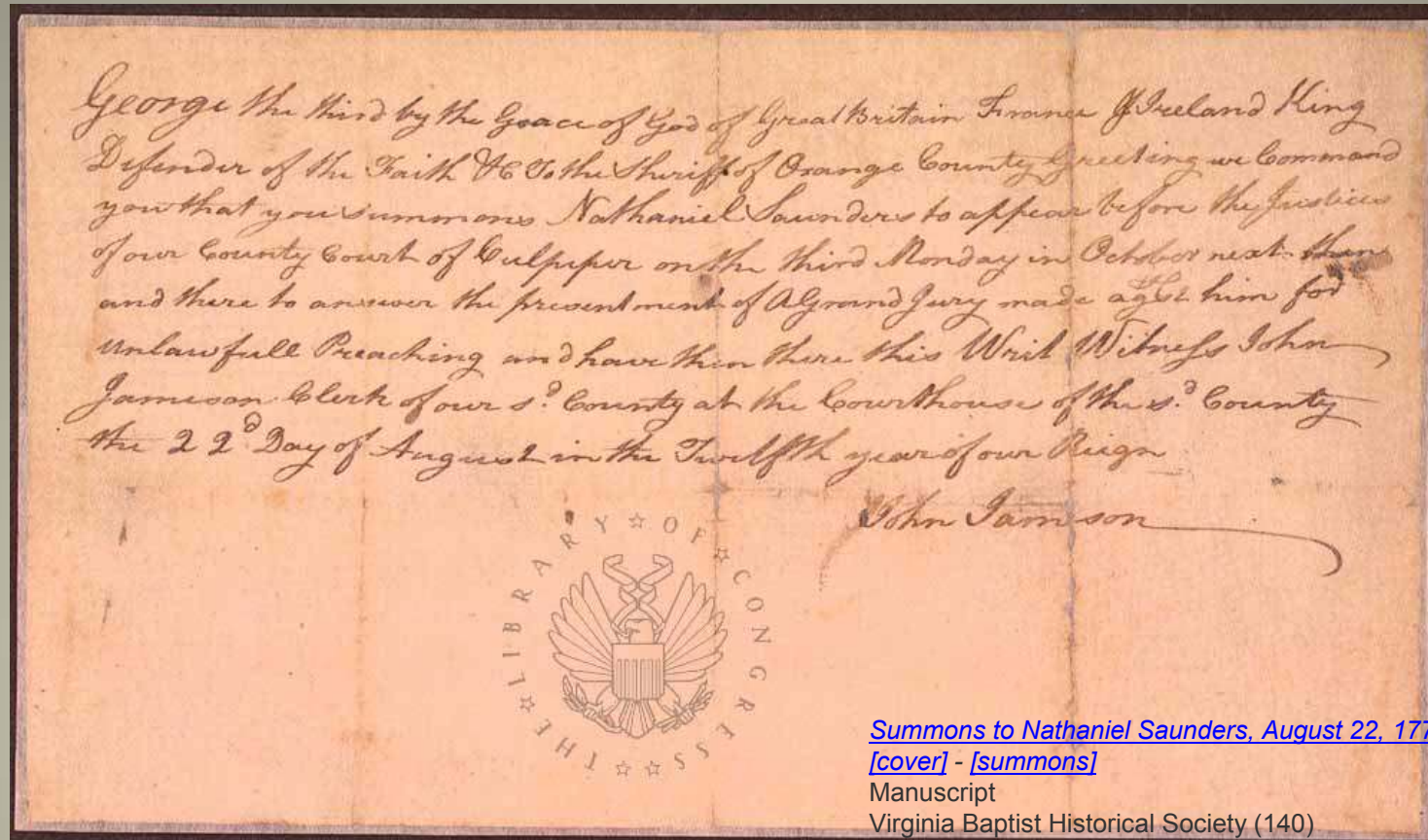
Colonial Virginia and Religious Persecution

PERSECUTION IN VIRGINIA

In Virginia , religious persecution, directed at **Baptists** and, to a lesser degree, at **Presbyterians**, continued after the Declaration of Independence.

The perpetrators were members of the **Church of England**, sometimes acting as vigilantes but often operating in tandem with local authorities.

Physical violence was usually reserved for Baptists, against whom there was social as well as theological animosity.



[Summons to Nathaniel Saunders, August 22, 1772](#)

[\[cover\]](#) - [\[summons\]](#)

Manuscript

Virginia Baptist Historical Society (140)

Unlawful Preaching

Many Baptist ministers refused on principle to apply to local authorities for a license to preach, as Virginia law required, for they considered it intolerable to ask another man's permission to preach the Gospel. As a result, they exposed themselves to arrest for "unlawfull Preaching," as Nathaniel Saunders (1735-1808) allegedly had done. Saunders, at this time, was the minister of the Mountain Run Baptist Church in Orange County, Virginia.

The Virginia members of the Church of England, and often, local officials, attacked and tormented Baptists in the area. A difference of opinion over theology and social conditions were apparently the cause of this harassment and intolerance.

According to the Religion and the Founding of the American Republic”
“ A notorious instance of abuse in 1771 of a well-known Baptist preacher, "Swearin Jack" Waller, was described by the victim:

"The Parson of the Parish [accompanied by the local sheriff] would keep running the end of his horsewhip in [Waller's] mouth, laying his whip across the hymn book, etc. When done singing [Waller] proceeded to prayer. In it he was violently jerked off the stage; they caught him by the back part of his neck, beat his head against the ground, sometimes up and sometimes down, they carried him through the gate . . . where a gentleman [the sheriff] gave him . . . twenty lashes with his horsewhip.“”

Source: Religion and the Founding of the American Republic
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel05.html>

Baptist Persecutions in Virginia

A. Baptists entered VA in early 18th century

B. First VA Baptists thrown in jail in Spotsylvania in 1768, for refusing to stop preaching, cited with disturbing the peace; (John Waller, Lewis Craig, James Childs)

C. Imprisonment of Baptists continued until at least 1778, for periods of up to 5 months

D. Baptists accused of child abuse, Baptist marriages not recognized

E. Persecutions included (actual quotes from court records):

"pelted with apples and stone"	"arrested as a vagabond and schismatic"
"jailed for permitting a man to pray"	"ducked and nearly drowned by 20 men"
"meeting broken up by a mob"	"tried to suffocate him with smoke"
"shot with a shot-gun"	"severely beaten with a whip"
"whipped severely by the Sheriff"	"hands slashed while preaching"
"horses ridden over his hearers at jail"	"pulled down and hauled about by hair"
"commanded to take a dram, or be whipped"	"tried to blow him up with gun powder"
"drunken rowdies put in same cell with him"	"ruffians armed with bludgeons beat him"
"dragged off stage, kicked, and cuffed about"	

Source: THE BAPTIST INDEX: Outline of Baptist Persecution in Colonial America

<http://www.brucegourley.com/baptists/persecutionoutline.htm>

The Baptist Fight for Religious Liberty in Virginia: A Timeline

A. 1770 Baptists presented petitions for the removal of restrictions placed on them

B.1775 Baptists presented petitions calling for the abolishment of the established church; one petition garnered 10,000 signatures, including Presbyterians and some Anglicans

C.1776 VA disestablished Church of England; dissenters exempted from attending church and paying taxes to the Church, and allowed to publicly voice their religious sentiments but no separation of church and state; Baptists were still not happy, and were yet persecuted

D.1777 Jefferson wrote a "Bill for Religious Freedom" declaring that "no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever"; no immediate action was taken (Jefferson departed for Paris, leaving James Madison to champion the bill)

E.1778-1786

church Baptists continued to insist on full religious liberty and separation of and state; John Leland, a Massachusetts transplant, was a popular minister who supported Jefferson's religious freedom bill and led the Baptist agitation for separation of church and state; during this time, a number of denominations were willing to compromise by decreeing a general religious tax; the Baptists refused

F. 1786 VA established Religious Freedom; Baptists complained that the proposed new federal constitution did not make sufficient provision for religious liberty

Source: THE BAPTIST INDEX: Outline of Baptist Persecution in Colonial America

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Dunking of Baptist Ministers

David Barrow was pastor of the Mill Swamp Baptist Church in the Portsmouth, Virginia, area. He and a "ministering brother," Edward Mintz, were conducting a service in 1778, when they were attacked. "As soon as the hymn was given out, a gang of well-dressed men came up to the stage . . . and sang one of their obscene songs. Then they took to plunge both of the preachers. They plunged Mr. Barrow twice, pressing him into the mud, holding him down, nearly succeeding in drowning him . . . His companion was plunged but once . . . Before these persecuted men could change their clothes they were dragged from the house, and driven off by these enraged churchmen."

[The Dunking of David Barrow and Edward Mintz in the Nansemond River, 1778](#)

Oil on canvas by Sidney King, 1990
Virginia Baptist Historical Society (141)

The persecution of Baptists made a strong, negative impression on many patriot leaders, whose loyalty to principles of civil liberty exceeded their loyalty to the Church of England in which they were raised.

James Madison was not the only patriot to despair, as he did in 1774, that the "diabolical Hell conceived principle of persecution rages" in his native colony.

Accordingly, civil libertarians like **James Madison and Thomas Jefferson** joined Baptists and Presbyterians to defeat the campaign for state financial involvement in religion in Virginia.

QUERY XVII.

THE different religions received into that state?

The first settlers in this country were emigrants from England, of the English church, just at a point of time when it was flushed with complete victory over the religious of all other persuasions. Possessed, as they became, of the powers of making, administering, and executing the laws, they shewed equal intolerance in this country with their Presbyterian brethren, who had emigrated to the northern government. The poor Quakers were flying from persecution in England. They cast their eyes on these new countries as asylums of civil and religious freedom; but they found them free only for the reigning sect. / Several acts of the Virginia assembly of 1659, 1662 and 1693, had made it penal in parents to refuse to have their children baptized; had prohibited the unlawful assembling of Quakers: had made it penal for any master of a vessel to bring a Quaker into the state; had ordered those already here, and such as should come thereafter, to be imprisoned till they should abjure the country; provided a milder punishment

Intolerance in Virginia

In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson reflected on the religious intolerance in seventeenth-century Virginia, specifically on the anti-Quaker laws passed by the Virginia Assembly from 1659 onward.

Jefferson apparently believed that it was no more than an historical accident that Quakers had not been physically punished or even executed in Virginia as they had been in Massachusetts.

for their first and second return, but death for their third; had inhibited all persons from suffering their meetings in or near their houses, entertaining them individually, or disposing of books which supported their tenets. If no execution took place here, as did in New-England, it was not owing to the moderation of the church, or spirit of the legislature, as may be inferred from the law itself; but to historical circumstances which have not been handed down to us. / The Anglicans retained full possession of the country about a century. Other opinions began then to creep in, and the great care of the government to support their own church, having begotten an equal degree of indolence in its clergy, two-thirds of the people had become dissenters at the commencement of the present revolution. The laws indeed were still oppressive on them, but the spirit of the one party had subsided into moderation, and of the other had risen to a degree of determination which commanded respect.

The present state of our laws on the subject of religion is this. The convention of May 1776, in their declaration of rights, declared it to be a truth, and a natural right, that the exercise of religion should be free; but when they proceeded to form on that declaration the ordinance of government, instead of taking up every principle declared in the bill of rights, and guarding it by legislative sanction, they passed over that which asserted our religious rights, leaving them as they

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RICHMOND PROJECT

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

By
Katherine Atkinson
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