

Samuel Harris: Apostle of Virginia

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Samuel Harris was a prominent member of society in Halifax, and later Pittsylvania, County, Virginia. As an Anglican, he served as vestryman, commander of militia, and member of the House of Burgesses. Once converted to the Baptist faith, he became an itinerant minister who worked to establish Separate Baptist churches throughout Virginia. His work as moderator of the Virginia Baptist Association placed him in the center of the drive for religious freedom during the American Revolution and into the early Constitutional period.

The religious revivals in New England that began in the 1730s spread southward to Virginia in the mid 1740s through the work of missionaries sent from Tennent's Log College, and continued with great strength through the early 1770s. Samuel Davies was responsible for most of the progress the Presbyterians saw in the spread of their denomination, especially in the Tidewater and Central Piedmont regions of Virginia. Their progress was primarily due to their emphasis on the common doctrines between the Anglicans and themselves, and through their moderation in religious expression that made their form of dissent more palatable to the religious establishment. This first phase of the Great Awakening in Virginia by evangelical Presbyterians, though denounced by Anglicans as enthusiastic, gave way in the 1760s to the rise of the Separate Baptists, who "entertained no illusions that they had any similarities to the Anglicans."¹

In the late 1750s, the Baptists were such a small minority in Virginia that they held no practical influence, but within a decade of the establishment of their first congregation, they had revived the revival movement. The Baptists contributed religious enthusiasm and a zeal for missions to the continued Great Awakening in the American colonies. The Baptist movement in Virginia occurred in two stages, the first from 1758 to 1769 was a slow and steady progression of the faith, hindered by the need to dispel prejudices among the common people of the colony. The second, from 1769 to 1775 saw the rise of the Baptist evangelist, an increase in the number of converts and churches and as a result, more determined persecution from the Anglican establishment. The expansion of the Baptists in Virginia and their growing influence was a direct product of the ministry of Colonel Samuel Harris, a nearly forgotten Baptist itinerate preacher who deserves to take his place in Great Awakening history. By the time of the American Revolution, Separate Baptists numbered more than ten thousand, and by 1790, there were more than two hundred Baptist churches and one hundred and fifty ordained ministers in the denomination in Virginia. Their enthusiasm, the rapid rise in their membership, and their place in the social order created an environment of opposition that soon developed into open oppression, and resulted in the drive for religious liberty in Virginia.²

Early developments in the Great Awakening caused a division between the conservative and revivalist factions of the Baptists. The conservatives, who held to a Calvinist doctrine, styled themselves as "Regulars," while the revivalists, who tended toward Arminianism, took the

¹ Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 244.

² Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia*, 1930. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1930), 106; William Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South Tracing Through the Separates the Influence of the Great Awakening, 1754-1787* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), 88.

name Separates. Unlike the Regulars, they refused to adopt an official creedal statement of doctrinal position, choosing to allow individual congregations authority within local assemblies. The first Regular Baptist Association in Virginia, the Ketokton Association, adopted the Philadelphia Confession of Faith of 1742, but the Separates rejected denominational confessional standards. For the Separates, the Bible alone provided the framework for orthodoxy and correct religious practices; they feared dead orthodoxy and meaningless ritual more than they feared disagreement among the congregations. Preaching among the Separates emphasized the depravity of man, atonement from sin in Christ alone, individual consciousness of a “new birth,” and adult baptism of the converted as a public witness to inward transformation. Generally, members of Separate Baptist churches established their worship practices to the “Nine Christian Rites” found in the New Testament. These were adult believer’s baptism, weekly observance of The Lord’s Supper, love feasts, laying-on of hands after baptism, anointing of the sick, the right hand of fellowship, the kiss of charity, foot-washing, and the dedication of children. The Separate Baptists did not recognize gender restrictions on service or public worship. Women prayed and exhorted at meetings and served in positions of leadership within the church. Individual congregations elected office holders including pastors, deacons, evangelists, ruling elders, elderesses and deaconesses. Failure by an individual church to conform to all rites or practices considered proper to others did not result in loss of fellowship. To the Separate Baptists, doctrine was most important, not form or practice.³

The Separate Baptists were the primary evangelical force in Virginia. Their methods were more revivalistic than the Regulars, prompting Baptist minister and historian John Leland to write, “The *Regulars* were orthodox Calvinists, and the work under them was solemn and rational; but the *Separates* were most zealous, and the work among them was very noisy.”⁴ The enthusiasm and expression of emotion evident in Separate Baptist sermons brought criticism from the Established Church and from other, less intense, dissenting groups. Criticism also came from their political views that arose from their strict adherence to the letter of Scripture. The Separates emphasized the complete separation of church and state, and refused to apply for licenses as many of the Regulars had done under the 1689 Act of Toleration. Separate Baptists did not recognize the authority of civil government to regulate who could preach or where congregations could meet, in their view their calling was from God, and as such could never be subject to the laws of men. As a result of these views, the Separate Baptists were the most severely persecuted and were the group who threatened social structures to a point that politicians acknowledged the need for eliminating the Establishment and securing religious liberty for all Virginians.⁵

One of the earliest ministers for the Separate Baptists was Shubal Stearns. He became a Baptist in 1751, and feeling the call to “do a great work,” left Connecticut to spread revival to the south.⁶ He and his followers settled briefly in Berkeley County, Virginia where Stearns met his

³ Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia, 1699-1926*. (Richmond Virginia: Baptist Board of Missions and Education, 1955), 41-42.

⁴ John Leland, *The Virginia Chroicle*, Head X. As quoted in, Edward L. Bond, ed. *Spreading the Gospel in Colonial Virginia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 249.

⁵ Gewehr, 107-109. James, Charles Fenton. *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, VA: J.P. Bell Company, 1899), 13.

⁶ Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, (Richmond: John O. Lynch Printer, 1810), 366-367.

brother-in-law, Daniel Marshall. Marshall was a former Presbyterian minister, who had heard Whitefield preach and was inspired to rid himself of all his possessions to minister to the Natives and “to convert the heathen and thus hasten the glorious appearing of Christ.” His son recorded that, “he exchanged his commodious buildings for a miserable hut; his fruitful fields and loaded orchards for barren deserts; the luxuries of a well-furnished table for coarse and scant fare; and numerous civil friends for rude savages.”⁷ He returned to Virginia after eighteen months of missionary work to the Mohawk Indians along the Susquehanna River due to violence and war among the native tribes. In 1755, Stearns made the decision to move his small congregation to Guilford County, North Carolina. There they established a church on Sandy Creek, with only sixteen members. Through their missionary efforts, the assembly grew to more than six hundred in a short period of time, and began to evangelize in the southern parts of Virginia. The work of brothers Joseph and William Murphy, as well as that of Marshall among the Virginians brought revival to the Southside of Virginia. Among Marshall’s converts was Dutton Lane, who began to preach almost immediately following his baptism into the faith and in 1760 assisted in founding, and became the minister to the first Separate Baptist church in Virginia, the Dan River Church in Halifax County.⁸ In 1759, the ministry of the “Murphy boys” brought Colonel Samuel Harris to faith. Following his conversion experience, Harris became one of the most zealous and widely traveled evangelists in Virginia as well as a ministering elder in the Dan River Church.⁹

Samuel Harris is distinctive because he was one of the earliest Baptist converts in Virginia of education and high social status. The denomination had primarily appealed to the common person’s desire for community based on equality, but as the revival spread, many of the rural gentry began to embrace the new faith. Born on a Pamunkey River plantation in Hanover County on January 12, 1724, Harris migrated to the portion of Lunenburg County that later became Halifax County and in 1767 formed part of Pittsylvania County. Semple named him a man of respectable parentage and considerable education, who became a respected member of the community while still in his twenties. In 1748, he patented land on Sandy River at the headwaters of Strawberry Creek. In the course of his life, his plantation grew to nearly five thousand acres. In 1752, when Halifax County formed from Lunenburg County, Harris was appointed justice of the peace and sheriff. It was the practice of the colonial government to form new parishes under the Church of England as the established religion when new counties were constituted. Antrim Parish was formed in conjunction with Halifax County and Harris took the oath as one of its first vestryman with the attendant responsibilities of caring for the poor of the parish and marking the boundaries of the county. In addition to these titles, Harris also served as

⁷ Albert Henry Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States*. The American church history series, v. 2. (New York: Christian Literature, 1894) 292-293.

⁸ The church was founded prior to the creation of Pittsylvania County from Halifax in 1767. The precise location of Dan River Church has not been determined as the congregation dissolved sometime in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries.

⁹ Gewehr, 108, 117. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 159; William Taylor Thom, *The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Virginia The Baptists*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1900) 13.

Burgess of Halifax County, colonel of the Virginia militia, captain of Fort Mayo, and commissary for the forts on the Virginia frontier in the French and Indian War.¹⁰

As an Anglican, Harris developed a seriousness for the study of the Bible, and became convicted of his sinful nature. In 1758 and 1759, the militia staffed the frontier forts of Mayo, Trial, and Hickey's with Harris serving as captain of Fort Mayo and commissary to all three. In the course of his duties, he took the opportunity to attend Baptist preaching being held in a small house in his search to find internal peace. Early Baptist historian, Robert Semple, recorded Harris' conversion experience:

On one of his routes to visit the forts in his official character, he called at a small house, where he understood there was to be Baptist preaching. The preachers were Joseph and William Murphy; at that time, commonly called Murphy's boys. Being rigged in his military dress, he was not willing to appear in a conspicuous place. He seated himself behind a loom. God, nevertheless, found him out by his Spirit. His convictions now sunk so deep, that he could no longer conceal them. He left his sword and other parts of his rigging some in one place and some in another...Soon after this he was baptized by Rev. Daniel Marshall.¹¹

Almost immediately upon his conversion, he too began evangelistic efforts in the area. One of the earliest accounts of his zeal for spreading the gospel message relates his efforts to preach to the soldiers and officers of Fort Mayo. He preached the necessity of the new birth with such fervor that one of the officers accused him of taking his inspiration from the rum cask. Harris replied that he was not drunk, and continued speaking of his conversion both publically and privately to any who would listen.¹²

His ministry for the first seven years centered in his home county and the neighboring counties of Virginia and North Carolina in the company of Daniel Marshall. Apparently, Harris' message began to bear fruit early and pose a direct threat to the established church. James Craig, minister of the Anglican parish in Lunenburg County wrote in 1759, "In Halifax one Samuel Harris, formerly Burgess for that County and one William Murphy have raised and propagated a most shocking Delusion, which threatens the entire subversion of true Religion in these parts, unless the principle persons concerned in that delusion are apprehended or otherwise restrained."¹³ Following his conversion, Harris devoted his wealth and property for religious use in his home county. He had begun to construct a larger home for his family prior to the beginning of his ministry. He gave his new residence over to the use of public worship, deciding to continue to live in the older structure. He kept his family in a frugal manner, choosing to use his considerable wealth in charitable works and in the spread of the gospel message.¹⁴

He never worked north of the James until 1765, when he was invited by Allen Wyley to minister to a group of believers in Culpeper County. Harris chose James Reed to accompany

¹⁰ Kidd, 244; Thom, 13; Maud Clement, *The History of Pittsylvania County, Virginia* (Baltimore: Regional Pub. Co., 1973) 58-60.

¹¹ Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, (Richmond: John O. Lynch Printer, 1810), 377-378.

¹² *Ibid.*, 381.

¹³ Quoted in Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia, 1699-1926*, 126.

¹⁴ Semple, 379.

him on these travels, and together they preached wherever they found opportunity.¹⁵ When Harris reached Culpeper, he experienced opposition for the first time. Due to his position in society and the lack of a strong Anglican tradition among the backcountry settlers, he had not been hindered from preaching as he saw fit in his home counties, but north of the James, the conditions were much different. Following a sermon in Culpeper, Harris was driven out of the pulpit by a mob armed with sticks, whips, and clubs. He fled into Orange County, where he was pulled down and dragged by the hair and by the leg, but was rescued by friends. On another occasion, “he was knocked down by a rude fellow, while he was preaching.”¹⁶ Harris and Read returned yearly to the counties north of the James until 1770, constituting churches in many of the areas in which they preached and baptizing as many as two hundred in the course of their journeys. Among these churches was the Upper Spotsylvania Church, chartered in 1767 for all of the Separate Baptists north of the James. By 1769, it was necessary to form more churches in the area to accommodate the growing numbers of believers. In November and December they constituted four churches, the Carter’s Run Church, the Blue Run Church in Orange County, Lower Spotsylvania Church, and another in Amelia County.¹⁷

As the movement gathered strength, defections from Anglican congregations caused disruption to change to persecution, but Harris refused to be deterred. Semple records Harris’ response to being jailed and ordered not to preach:

Arrested in Culpeper and carried into court as a disturber of the peace, he was ordered not to preach in the county again within the twelvemonth on pain of going to jail. From Culpeper he went into Fauquier and preached at Carter’s Run. From thence he crossed the Blue Ridge and preached in Shenandoah. On his return from thence, he turned in at Captain Thomas Clanahan’s, in the county of Culpeper, where there was a meeting. While certain young ministers were preaching, the Word of God began to burn in Colonel Harriss’s heart. When they finished, he rose and addressed the congregation; ‘I partly promised the devil, a few days past, at the courthouse, that I would not preach in this county again in the term of a year. But the devil is a perfidious wretch, and covenants with him are not to be kept; and, therefore, I will preach.’ He preached a lively, animating sermon. The court never meddled with him more.”¹⁸

The ministry of Harris and Read continued to expand so that there was nowhere in the colony that they did not have some evangelistic outreach. As their message bore fruit, the movement began to grow rapidly, with each new convert spreading the gospel in their own missionary zeal. Harris travelled almost constantly, preaching, baptizing and assisting in the foundation of Separate Baptist churches throughout Virginia.¹⁹

Harris’ strength was not his doctrinal preaching, but his winning manner and personal charisma. Apparently, when delivering a sermon, Harris could surpass the great Whitfield in

¹⁵ Thom, 14; Isaac, 164.

¹⁶ Gewehr, 119-120.

¹⁷ Garrett Ward Sheldon and Daniel L. Dreisbach, ed., *Religion and Political Culture in Jefferson's Virginia*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 7-8; Ryland, 45-49.

¹⁸ Semple, 382.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 379.

touching the heart of his congregation. “Some have described him,” says Semple, “when exhorting at great meetings, as pouring forth streams of celestial lightening from his eyes.”²⁰ The large meetings where Harris ministered are evidence of the rise of camp-meetings during the First Great Awakening. Although most historians recognize the open-air camp meeting as a phenomena characteristic of the later religious revivals in Kentucky in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this method of evangelism was first developed in Virginia by Samuel Harris and James Read in their evangelistic work during the 1770s. Semple records that:

It was not uncommon, at their great meetings for many hundreds of men to camp on the ground, in order to be present the next day. The night-meetings, thro’ the great work of God, continued very late; the ministers would scarcely have an opportunity to sleep...It frequently happened that, when they would retire to rest at a late hour, they would be under the necessity of arising again, thro’ the earnest cries of the penitent: there were instances of persons traveling more than one hundred miles to one of these meetings; to go forty or fifty was not uncommon.²¹

To give further credence to the claim that camp meetings were an integral part of the First Great Awakening, Semple’s work lists an excerpt of evangelist John Waller’s “Camp-Meeting Regulations” from the year 1775 or 1776 in his biography of that evangelist.²²

In the course of his ministry, Harris either established or assisted in establishing a number of Separate Baptist congregations in Virginia. In 1769, Harris and Walker constituted the Nottaway Church with sixty-six members. In his home county of Pittsylvania, thirty-seven members with Harris as its pastor organized the Falls Creek Church in 1770. That year he also assisted in organizing Goldmine Church in Louisa County and South River Church in Frederick County. Harris was instrumental in constituting five congregations in 1771. These were Fiery Run in Culpeper County, Amherst (now Ebenezer) in Amherst County, County Line Church in Pittsylvania County, Cub Creek in Charlotte County, and Sandy Creek in Amelia County. Two more churches followed in 1773, Albermarle Baptist and one more in Pittsylvania County, Old Banister Church. Harris continued to visit and minister to these congregations until the 1780s, when a paralytic stroke limited his ability to travel and preach.²³

As the numbers of Separate Baptist churches grew and membership in those churches began to increase, so too did the threat they posed to the authority of the Church of England. The Act of Toleration passed by the British Parliament in the reign of William and Mary had granted limited rights to dissenter groups throughout the empire. Clergy of any denomination could apply for licenses to preach only in specified locations. Separates, because of their foundational principles against surrendering religious matters to civil authority, refused to request such licenses and therefore exposed themselves to prosecution by judicial and ecclesiastical authorities. The first known case of imprisonment in the state of Virginia occurred in Spotsylvania County, on June 4, 1768. John Waller, Lewis Craig, and James Childs, all converts of Harris, were arrested and brought before the magistrates. A local lawyer accused them of being “disturbers of the peace.” His words bear witness to the evangelical fervor of

²⁰ Semple, 380.

²¹ Semple, 10. Sheldon and Dreisbach, ed., 8.

²² Semple, 407-408.

²³ Ryland, 49. Semple, 380.

these men, and to the prevailing attitudes of many citizens against them. In his address to the court the complainant stated, "May it please your worships, these men are great disturbers of the peace, they cannot but meet a man upon the road, but they must ram a text of scripture down his throat."²⁴ The three were offered release if they would agree not to preach in the county for the period of a year and a day. They refused and were confined to the local jail for more than six weeks.²⁵

In 1769, the first petitions regarding the spread of dissenting religious groups began to appear before the House of Burgesses. The earliest came from Anglican clergy regarding the "pernicious doctrines" that the Baptists were spreading. Over the next several years, as legal persecution of dissenters, especially the Baptists, continued to increase, more petitions from the Baptists began to appear. In the early months of 1772, Baptists of several counties appealed to the legislature for assurances that the Act of Toleration was still in effect in the colony. As questions arose as to the place of the North American colonies within the British Empire and the application of British law to the subjects living there, there was some question as to whether the act applied to those in Virginia. The House of Burgesses struggled with political implications of accepting an act of Parliament on the issue of religion while they rejected more recent initiatives at taxation. In counties where American patriotic sentiment ran high, Baptist ministers and lay people were beaten and imprisoned even if officially licensed to preach and minister to their congregations. The House proposed a bill that would offer limited tolerance in 1774, but failed to move on the measure before Governor Dunmore dismissed the House of Burgesses due to their support for Boston. Rising tensions with Britain and confusion regarding the seat of legislative power distracted the efforts of many to secure a more definite statement of religious liberty.²⁶

The period of intolerance ended with the advent of military hostilities against England in 1775. The ruling elites, who belonged primarily to the established church, were willing to agree to an uneasy truce with the dissenters in return for their support against the British. The Baptists presented an important petition to the Virginia Colonial Convention in August. They pledged their support in the "military resistance against Great Britain in her unjust invasion, tyrannical oppression, and repeated hostilities." In return, they requested that Baptist ministers be allowed to preach to the soldiers during the campaign "without molestation or abuse."²⁷ The Convention granted their request. The outbreak of the War for Independence halted much of the missionary work of the Baptists, but the need for unity among the colonists led to increased opportunities for religious dissenters to gain greater recognition and practical freedom of worship. The Convention's resolution to allow Baptist ministers to "celebrate divine worship, and to preach to the soldiers, or exhort from time to time" was important because it legitimized the Baptists and placed them on equal footing with the Anglicans in the military setting.²⁸

The war also provided religious leaders an opportunity to put their religious convictions into practice. During the Revolutionary years, Harris served his county in more practical

²⁴ Semple, 15.

²⁵ Ibid. 15-16.

²⁶ James, 31-35.

²⁷ Ibid., 52-53.

²⁸ Spangler, Jewel L. *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century*. (Charlottesville:University of Virginia Press, 2008), 204.

matters. Pittsylvania County Court of Claims records indicate that Harris ran two wagons from Petersburg to the citizens of the county to provide them with salt, a precious commodity in those days. They also show that he transported military supplies from the depot at Peytonsborg to Charlotte Town and served as an express rider on the Charleston to Philadelphia mail route. During this period Harris continued his evangelical ministry and advanced the political goals of the Separate Baptists through petitions to the new Virginia government.²⁹

The Virginia Separate Baptist Association, who presented their affirmation of loyalty to the patriot cause, had been formed in 1771, with Samuel Harris as its moderator, in an effort to direct missionary and pastoral efforts, as well as to provide a public voice for the denomination. Members of the Association continued to recognize Harris character and abilities on a yearly basis. They elected him moderator of the Association whenever he was in attendance. In 1774, when the question of whether all of the ministerial gifts enumerated in Ephesians 4 should be in use, the Association answered in the affirmative. They unanimously consented to name Harris, “The Apostle of Virginia” with the authority to oversee all of the Separate Baptist churches south of the James River. The position was soon abolished as contrary to the denominational conviction against authority outside of individual congregations. Harris continued to serve in the Associational leadership as moderator and as Chairman of the General Committee representing the United Baptist Churches in Virginia in the post-Revolutionary era.³⁰

When the Virginia Convention began to draft a new state constitution and Declaration of Rights in 1776, the Baptists and Presbyterians found an opportunity to press for the religious liberty that had previously been denied to them. In an atmosphere where conflicts over religion threatened political unity, James Madison championed the efforts to change the language of Article 16 in the new declaration from that of mere tolerance to full religious liberty. The adoption of the Virginia Declaration of Rights in June 1776, and the religious liberty it offered was a victory for the Baptists, but it left the Anglican establishment intact and failed to define the precise relationship between government and religion. For the next decade, religious groups would battle the state government over practical matters regarding the ambiguities of Article 16.³¹

One of the primary debates regarding the recognition of dissenting ministers in the Revolutionary period centered on their ability to legally perform the marriage ceremony in Virginia. Following the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the colonial government had enacted a series of laws in an effort to strengthen the authority of the Church of England. Among these laws was a prohibition against any minister other than Anglican clergy to officiate at weddings. In June 1780, the Baptists delivered a petition, signed again by Harris as Association moderator, to Richmond questioning the validity of those wartime marriages already performed by religious dissenters. In October, the House of Delegates enacted legislation that declared all marriages performed by any clergyman “good and valid in law.” In an effort to prevent further difficulties, they authorized the county courts to license no more than four ministers from each denomination “to celebrate the rites of matrimony within their counties only.”³² Baptist and Presbyterian petitions protesting this continued discrimination under the law continued to arrive in the

²⁹ Pittsylvania County Court of Claims Records, Pittsylvania County Clerk’s Office.

³⁰ Newman, 298; Ryland, 87-88, 133-135.

³¹ Semple, 49-53; Spangler, 206-207.

³² Semple, 34.

legislature through the end of the war. In June 1784, the House of Delegates agreed to a resolution declaring in matters of the marriage rite, “that in general all legal distinctions in favor of any particular religious society may be abolished.”³³

A struggle for full religious liberty and a continuation of the debates of the 1770s marked the immediate post-Revolutionary period. The Baptists led the movement against any appearance of union between Church and State, while the Episcopalians attempted to regain lost authority and the Presbyterians took a middle ground. In the closing months of 1784, a plan for General Assessment came to the House of Delegates. The scheme called for “the people of this Commonwealth, according to their respective abilities... to pay a moderate tax or contribution annually for the support of the Christian religion, or of some Christian church, denomination, or communion of Christians, or of some form of Christian worship.”³⁴ The Baptists strongly opposed such a tax as a violation of the liberty they had just won from Britain, and some Presbyterians agreed. A few members of the Presbyterian clergy were willing to agree as long as the plan was broad and liberal enough to allow some form of religious liberty while still unifying Church and State.³⁵

The “Bill Establishing a Provision for Teachers of Religion” prompted a renewed effort from the Baptists in the form of numerous petitions against the legal unification of religion and government in the new Commonwealth. Religious opponents found support among legislators who felt that the division of Church and State was a foundational republican principle that guaranteed liberty to all citizens. James Madison again championed the cause of the Baptists with the printing of his “Memorial and Remonstrance” which influenced many in the House that his position was a valid one. His efforts, and those of the religious petitioners, were effective in keeping the Assessment Bill confined to debate in committee, where it remained and died.³⁶

Madison pressed his advantage in December 1785, by proposing that the Virginia legislature adopt Jefferson’s “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,” which had first been introduced in 1779. The House of Delegates overwhelmingly passed the measure, and effectively guaranteed freedom of conscience to all Virginians in the matter of religious worship. When the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom became law in January 1786, the Commonwealth became “the first government in the world to establish by statute the complete divorce of Church and State,— the greatest contribution of America to the sum of Western civilization.”³⁷

The final disestablishment of the Anglican Church created an environment conducive to a rebirth of the religious revivals interrupted by the American Revolution. Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches saw a period of growth that continued well into the next decade and spread into the frontier regions of the new nation. The Baptists, through their determination to oppose civil and religious unification led the way in this religious renewal. By 1790, there had been a social revolution in Virginia. The Baptists once considered a religious denomination of the lower classes, included among their membership many men of wealth and influence, and had become a driving force in Virginia politics.³⁸ The early evangelistic efforts of Samuel Harris and

³³ James, 124-125.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 125-127.

³⁶ Spangler, 212-213.

³⁷ Ryland, 126.

³⁸ Geweher, 116-117.

others had spread the Baptist faith in Virginia, providing the foundation for their efforts to effect legislative change in the cause of full religious liberty. Harris died peacefully in his home in 1799, apparently satisfied with the results of his ministry. He requested that his funeral sermon be preached from II Timothy 4: 7-8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."³⁹ Harris' life illustrates the impact of the religious fervor of the Great Awakening as the impetus for the spread of dissenting denominations, and of the ways that the adherents to those faiths used their belief in freedom of conscience to effect social and political change in the new American republic.

³⁹ Clement, 129.