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Drawn Together, Drawn Apart: Black and White Baptists in Tidewater Virginia, 1800-1875

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**Drawn Together, Drawn Apart: Black and White Baptists in Tidewater Virginia,
1800-1875**

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Telford, Pennsylvania

**Master of Arts, The College of William and Mary, 2005
Bachelor of Arts, Gettysburg College, 2003**

**A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

Lyon G. Tyler Department of History

**The College of William and Mary
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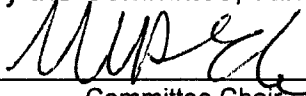
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Nancy Alenda Hillman

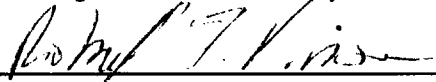
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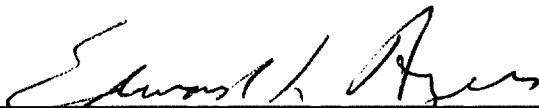
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ABSTRACT

A detailed study of local Baptist communities in Tidewater Virginia, "Drawn Together, Drawn Apart" explores the interactions of black and white evangelicals both under slavery and following emancipation. Significant bonds of fellowship between black and white Baptists persisted throughout the antebellum years. The majority of black Baptists continued to engage in baptismal, worship, and disciplinary gatherings with their white neighbors. Baptists of both races participated in the national culture of reform through their commitment to temperance, mission work, and other forms of "benevolence."

At the same time, a pattern of black religious autonomy was developing. As Christian paternalists, white Baptist leaders sought to bolster supervision of black members, but by frequently commissioning black deacons to do the actual work this monitoring entailed, they fostered opportunities for black leadership, preaching, and literacy; several large all-black congregations were founded during the antebellum period.

The aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831 plays a central role in this study. Scholars have seen that event as the beginning of a period of repression that lasted until general emancipation. Virginia did indeed adopt much stricter black codes in 1832; these included a complete ban on black preaching, exhorting, and independent religious activity. Yet this dissertation presents many examples of how such practices survived, sometimes with the support of white Baptists.

Some blacks continued to preach—a fact of which whites were well aware—and black Baptists increasingly met separately from whites. While white leaders sometimes attempted to provide supervision for such meetings, their efforts were often cursory, leading to the conclusion that they either did not care enough about the law to enforce it or that they disagreed with it in the first place. What did bring an end to interracial religious activity was not the Turner revolt, but rather emancipation. Some church splits were initiated by whites, some by blacks, and some were ironically the result of a cooperative effort.

Through the careful examination of local Baptist records, this work illuminates the varied exchanges that took place between nineteenth-century blacks and whites. Amid an increasingly entrenched slaveholding system and an expanding body of black codes, followed by a cataclysmic Civil War, the ways in which black and white Baptists experienced fellowship—both together and separately—reveal much about the development of southern society before and after emancipation.

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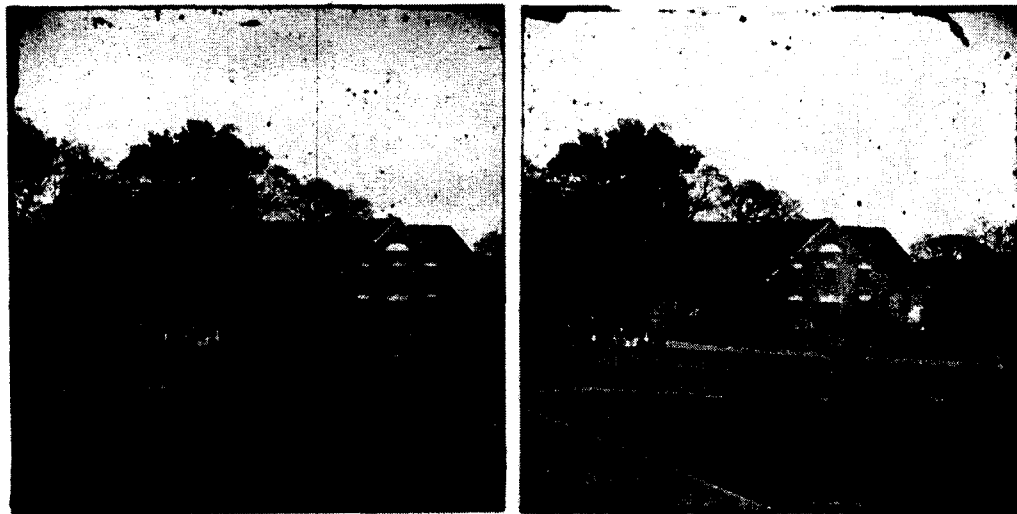
I completed almost all of my writing after our little ones arrived, and I must acknowledge our fantastic caregivers—Katie Young, Elizabeth English, Abigail English, Jenny Dieffenbach, and Tana Connolly—without whom I could not have finished. I want to thank my husband's family—which I count as my own—for all your love and support. To my parents and brother—thank you for your never-ending love and encouragement over the years. Mom, for helping to improve my writing and for your patience as Dad and I took just one more history camping trip, and Dad, for everything you did to nurture my interest in the subject. For good reason, I had planned on dedicating my doctoral dissertation to you long before I ever started graduate school. To my darling girls—I did my best work after you came along. You pushed me to be more organized and disciplined, and I hope someday you'll understand what a joy it was to write my dissertation with you giggling in the next room. And to my darling husband—you have been a constant source of support as I struggled to complete this task. For all the conversations over the dinner table in which I rattled on about another day at the archives, for all the times you read my work and offered thoughtful comments—thank you from the bottom of my heart. And finally, I could not conclude without acknowledging the One to whom all my thanks and praise are due—thank you, Christ, for your strength, for your grace, and for this opportunity.

*To my Dad,
for getting me started*

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Introduction: "A Grand Jubilee"



Stereograph, First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, c. April-June 1865
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Detail of left half of stereograph, First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia,
c. April-June 1865
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

As the sun came through the clouds on a spring day in 1865, a large group of black men, women, and children stood together for a photograph at the corner of College and Broad Streets in Richmond, Virginia. Several uniformed Federal soldiers—some black, some white—stopped nearby as the camera affixed the entire scene onto a glass plate. The Confederate capital had fallen in early April, the war was at an end, and the days of slavery were passing into history. The photographer caught a moment of

anticipation for these people; freedom had finally come, and the promise of a better future lay ahead.

The site of this historic image was no accident; the members of the group had chosen to pose in front of the expansive edifice of the First African Baptist Church. Constructed in the early nineteenth century, this meeting house held the largest assembly hall in the city—a space that had been used over the years by both blacks and whites for meetings. The building had hosted a number of significant events in Virginia’s history, including the state Constitutional Convention in 1829 and a meeting of secessionists early in 1861. On April 9, 1865, the day of Robert E. Lee’s surrender to U.S. Grant, the black Civil War correspondent Thomas Morris Chester observed a momentous “grand jubilee meeting” at First African, “where Jeff Davis [had] frequently convened the conspirators to plot and execute treason.” Chester recounted that “the colored people turned out in full force; every seat was taken up and all standing room was occupied; the windows were thronged, and hundreds were outside unable to get within hearing or seeing distance.”¹

Perhaps some of those assembled in the photograph participated in the memorable jubilee at the church. Some also may have been students at the day school that began meeting in the church that April; according to schoolteacher Lucy Chase of the New England Freedmen’s Aid Society, 1,075 scholars enrolled when it opened.² And perhaps

¹ Thomas Morris Chester, “Richmond, Apr. 9, 1865,” in J.R.M. Blackett, ed., *Thomas Morris Chester, Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Virginia Front*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 3-4, 299. Chester, a Harrisburg native, was a reporter for the *Philadelphia Press* and had been covering the war in Virginia since 1864.

² Lucy Chase to [Hannah E.] Stevenson, Apr. 18, 1865, in *Freedmen’s Record*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Boston, Jun. 1865), 95-96; see p. 89 for Stevenson’s first name. See also Freedmen’s Bureau report, Richmond, Virginia, Third District, Oct. 1865, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; an image of this document is found in Elvatrice Parker Belsches, *Richmond, Virginia*, Black America Series (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 56. Judging by the number of children in the photograph, it seems likely that this group was primarily composed of students from the school at First African. Chase mentions that a separate

some were members of the congregation itself—now numbering more than three thousand people—that worshipped together in the meeting house every Sunday. The church’s white pastor, Robert Ryland, who had served the congregation since its establishment in 1841, stepped down from his post in May 1865, and although some members initially protested his resignation, they welcomed the appointment of former black deacon James H. Holmes, whom Ryland had baptized before the war, as their new pastor. The deed of First African’s building would soon pass into the hands of black trustees, who now, as freedmen, were able to hold the property in their own right.³

Although it was officially organized by white leaders of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, First African emerged due to joint initiatives of white and black Baptist leaders in the city. The black members of First Baptist took over the church building at College and Broad in 1841 that had once housed the integrated congregation, while the much smaller white membership moved on to construct a new space. Ryland, backed by a governing board of white elders, preached sermons, baptized new members, administered communion, and moderated meetings, but the church’s thirty black deacons

school for adults was to open as well. Additionally, at least one of the women in the photograph appears to be white; if so, she was probably one of the teachers at the school.

³ Robert Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” in *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, 1780-1880* (Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), 264; John Thomas O’Brien, Jr., *From Bondage to Citizenship: The Richmond Black Community, 1865-1867* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 97. For Holmes’s appointment as deacon, see First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930, Apr. 26, 1856, Library of Virginia (hereafter LVA). The church deed transferred to black trustees in Mar. 1866, First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930, transcript of deed transfer at the back of the first minute book, 1841-1859; *Journal of the Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia... 1867*, 13, in *African-American Baptist Annual Reports, 1865-1990*, Virginia, (Rochester, NY: American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Historical Library, 1997), microfilm reel 101; Charles F. Irons, “And All These Things Shall Be Added Unto You: The First African Baptist Church, Richmond, 1841-1865,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 47 (Winter 1998), 35; Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 258.

held considerable authority in regulating the treasury, disciplining members, and conducting almost all matters of church business.⁴

The history of the meeting house and congregation of First African Baptist well encapsulates the complexity of race relations in the nineteenth-century South, particularly among those who espoused Christianity. A building that had once sheltered black and white men and women who joined together in religious worship became an essentially all-black institution in the antebellum years and then passed from white to black trustees after the Civil War. A congregation that had once linked white and black leaders and laity in a close but unequal bond of fellowship formally abandoned white supervision in 1865. A white pastor, who had allowed and sometimes even encouraged a measure of black leadership and autonomy that skirted state laws, now stepped aside, and a black minister ascended the pulpit.

In a culture that upheld white supremacy and the system of racial servitude; that enacted a vast network of legislation to strip black men and women—slave and free—of basic human rights; that fabricated elaborate defenses of African slavery drawn from Biblical theology, moral philosophy, economic theory, and “scientific” study, a notable degree of cross-racial interactions and black freedoms was somehow able to develop. Likewise, among congregations in which blacks could not serve in leadership over whites and generally could not vote in church business; in which they were often relegated to separate sections of the buildings, or even to separate services; and in which blacks were forbidden by civil law to preach or gather independently, a remarkable level of interracial fellowship and black leadership persisted throughout the antebellum years.

⁴ See First African Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930; Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 245-72; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, [No. 1-No. 4]” *American Baptist Memorial* 15 (Sept.-Dec. 1855), 262-65, 289-92, 321-27, 353-56.

As blacks and whites embraced evangelical teachings, they acknowledged the spiritual equality that linked them together as brethren and sisters in Christ. Seeing themselves as participants in and beneficiaries of the evangelical revivals that swept the nation in the early nineteenth century, black and white Christians labored—both together and separately—to bring moral discipline to their own lives, to the members of their congregations, and to their society at large. Southern white Baptists placed the evangelization and religious instruction of slaves and free blacks at the center of their reform movements. In their aims for moral discipline and social purity, many black and white Baptists saw themselves as agents in establishing Christ’s kingdom on earth.

In the years after the Civil War, churches across the South divided along racial lines and black people established and developed their own congregations free of white oversight. Equipped with the training they had acquired before the war, both in mixed-race and all-black churches, and often with the approval and even encouragement of white brethren, black leaders sought ordination in the ministry and promoted education and discipline among their flocks during Reconstruction. Bonds of fellowship between whites and blacks, long strained by slavery and the antebellum racial hierarchy, generally dissolved, as the two groups pursued parallel, but almost entirely separate, courses in Christianizing their congregations and surrounding communities.

When studying nineteenth-century Baptists in Tidewater Virginia, one finds essential differences between what was written and what was practiced, both by civil lawmakers and citizens, and by Baptist leaders and churchgoers. Historian Samuel Hill’s characterization of southern religion as “filled with examples of the curious, surprising, translogical correlation between intention and actual outcome” can be applied also to the

larger disconnect between legislation and social practices.⁵ Virginia's racial code increasingly prohibited blacks' independent activities, particularly in the wake of Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831. Beginning shortly after that event, new laws barred slaves and free blacks from gathering without whites present; from preaching, exhorting, or in other ways leading worship; and from assembling for instruction in literacy. Yet as local records from the period demonstrate, racial proscriptions were not always enforced or obeyed in day-to-day life, and they often went through cycles of tightening and loosening depending on events.⁶ Moreover, as the minutes of interracial and black Baptist churches demonstrate, many blacks found ways to circumvent this legislation, and many whites chose to look the other way, or, in some cases, actually enabled their black brethren to violate the laws.

In a similar vein, white Baptist associations, theologians, and ministers increasingly advocated white oversight of the religious instruction of blacks during the antebellum period. They published treatises, circular letters, and catechisms on the subject, composed impassioned lectures and sermons, and engaged in robust discussions in their churches and associational meetings. Wary of the growing independence of black Baptist believers, particularly in the burgeoning black churches in urban areas, many whites sought to rein in black autonomy through "systematic" forms of instruction. At

⁵ Samuel S. Hill, with Donald G. Mathews, Beth Barton Schweiger, and John B. Boles, "Forum: Southern Religion," *Religion and American Culture* 8 (Summer 1998), 159.

⁶ In discussing free blacks in antebellum Virginia, Suzanne Lebsack notes that "freedom was a fragile and changeable condition, its terms shifting with the anxiety levels of the men who ran the legislature and the local courts. In practice, periods of relatively benign neglect alternated with spells of close surveillance and sudden repression." Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 90. In the words of Melvin Patrick Ely, "to accept the thesis of free black achievement" is to "also accept a meaningful distinction between white racial ideology and actual behavior in the Old South." Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), particularly pp. 435-43, quotation on 439.

the same time, however, white church leaders increasingly appointed black men as deacons and supervisors of black members and often neglected to attend, much less oversee, black meetings for worship, church business, and discipline. The continued and increasingly urgent calls for white oversight of black Baptists emerged in part because earlier appeals for the same had only partly borne fruit. The gap between white leaders' theories and practices thus often allowed black evangelical leadership and independent fellowship to flourish, even though antebellum black Baptists never operated outside the domination of white ministers and elders.

Scholars have traditionally interpreted the antebellum South as a society marked by mounting racial restrictions, with southern whites periodically reacting out of alarm and paranoia to slave conspiracies and abolitionist invective. The early 1830s mark a flash point in this narrative as Nat Turner led a gruesome slave revolt in southeastern Virginia and as the writings of militant abolitionists, such as David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison, began to infiltrate the southern states. While a proslavery paternalist ideology had already coalesced in the South by this point, southern politicians, philosophers, and ministers tightened their ranks after the advent of Walker, Garrison, and Turner to promote the racial order, defend the system of slavery and ameliorate its "abuses," and improve their methods of instructing and supervising black people in the Christian faith. These efforts further intensified as the evangelical denominations split between North and South over the issue of slavery in the 1840s.⁷

⁷ H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 125-26; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974), 285-86, 291; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 185-90; Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 110-15; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 137-38, 177, 204; Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin'*

Seeing southern evangelicalism as one of the primary forces that shaped and powered proslavery ideology, scholars have frequently asserted that the views and actions of southern white Christians toward black fellow churchgoers embodied the utilitarian aim of enhancing white “social control.”⁸ In this account, black and white believers could never achieve genuine fellowship, and their interactions were fraught with oppression, tension, and resistance. Yet students of antebellum southern evangelicalism should take the professed—and shared—beliefs of these evangelicals seriously: for blacks, the faith was more than an escape from worldly injustice; for whites, the faith was more than a way to control the black population. The place where both groups met on equal terms—as repentant sinners seeking forgiveness and salvation—must also be included in any analysis of southern church life.

Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 33, 159-62; Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 254-56; Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 1-20; Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 291-306; C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 25; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 325; Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997 [orig. pub. Cambridge University Press, 1993]), 20-109; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 212; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 98-100; Jeffrey Robert Young, *Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 211-29; John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 57-130; Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740-1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 197-98, 221-32; Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 140-58.

⁸ For a few examples of this thesis, see Willie Lee Rose, “The Domestication of Domestic Slavery,” in Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom*, ed. William W. Freehling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 35; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 186; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 177; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 44-50; Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 153; Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 224-25.

The southern racial hierarchy and system of servitude did constitute, “after all was said and done,” as Albert Raboteau has stated, “*the limit to Christian fellowship.*” Yet a variety of connections developed between white and black church members during the nineteenth century.⁹ In their weekly and monthly gatherings, the interactions among white and black Virginia Baptists were characterized less by racial animosity than by joint experiences of worship and discipline, by a simultaneously increasing level of separation and black autonomy, and by occasional push-and-pull exchanges between black and white leaders. As the work of John Boles has shown, while still racially structured, the biracial church was the closest blacks and whites came to experiencing equality in the slaveholding South.¹⁰ Christian theology proclaimed the unity of all confessing sinners in baptism, and excluded all those who failed to worship Christ and repent—whether white or black—from fellowship.

Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have contended that “in providing slaves with religious instruction, slaveholders did not usually distinguish between the two responsibilities” of saving souls and social control. While not specifically discussing white Baptists, the Genoveses’ point obscures the fact that some white evangelicals did distinguish between the two “responsibilities,” as indicated by their subtle—and occasionally overt—opposition to some of Virginia’s black laws.¹¹ Although the state forbade free blacks and slaves from gathering independently of whites, and banned black preaching and exhorting, numerous examples of the persistence of these practices can be

⁹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 180-210, quotation on 208.

¹⁰ John B. Boles: *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 157-202, and John B. Boles, ed., *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).

¹¹ Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75-79, quotation on 78.

found in the Baptist records of Tidewater Virginia. The fact that white Baptists did not do more to prevent such expressions of autonomy, and the fact that many churches increasingly placed black men in leadership over black members, evinces a lack of desire and at times, perhaps, an outright unwillingness, to uphold the law as well as a subtle acceptance of black people's attempts to achieve religious independence.¹²

Baptist churches provide a unique setting for exploring the exchanges between white and black southerners, as each congregation was sovereignly governed by its members. While Baptist congregations did unite to form district, state, and national organizations, such bodies did not have authority to implement regulations in their constituent churches, as contrasted with Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian forms of government. Under this system of congregational autonomy, a wide variety of racial policies and practices developed among Tidewater Baptists during the first half of the nineteenth century. Depending on the demographics of a given congregation and the surrounding community, the assertiveness of its black membership, and the opinions and personalities of its white leaders, blacks might be afforded significant freedoms and influence. Additionally, Baptists' commitment to congregational sovereignty worked against their efforts to supervise the growing number of all-black churches, and opportunities for black leadership and initiative in these bodies consequently expanded. Just as they were pulled in different directions by their views of blacks as fellow saints and as social subordinates, white Baptists were also caught between their support of congregational independence and their desire to control black congregations. That inconsistency of aims opened a path of possibility for black Christians, and they took it.

¹² According to Raboteau, there were "two conflicting tendencies in the biracial religious context: one encouraged black independence; the other, white control." Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 180.

In addition to their views on church autonomy, Baptists' dedication to moral purity also presented important opportunities for black churchgoers. In advocating the duty of each church member to watch over the rest of the congregation and to bring disciplinary charges against fellow believers when warranted, Baptists offered, as Monica Najar has shown, a "form of 'citizenship' to their members, which included people excluded from definitions of citizenship" in the public sphere.¹³ Although Baptist church governments increasingly marginalized black members in the nineteenth century, the status of the church as what historian Gregory Wills calls both a "voluntary democracy" and a "bastion of purity" endured. Southern white Baptists, notes Wills, managed to "combine a hierarchical view of society with an egalitarian view of the church."¹⁴ While black people were not permitted to testify against whites in secular courts, black church members could accuse white members of moral failings and defend themselves before mixed-race audiences. Black deacons frequently oversaw the behavior of black members in Baptist churches, choosing whether to report offenses, how to investigate them, and how to judge the accused. As churches increasingly separated along racial lines, black leaders came to wield even greater authority over the discipline of those in their flocks.

To expand their supervision of Afro-Christians in the 1840s and 1850s, white evangelicals continually sought to bring blacks into licensed, white-led churches. Since whites often lacked the manpower to oversee the growing numbers of black congregants and to address their needs, however, they appointed free blacks and slaves to do that work—a trend that produced both racial segregation and black autonomy in church

¹³ Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

¹⁴ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-10, quotations on 5 and 9.

bodies. More than a few whites *intended* to tighten their control over blacks by adopting racial policies at the congregational and associational levels. But as whites increasingly allowed blacks to serve as deacons, black Christians in many senses gained more freedom over the years. This autonomy is most clearly apparent in black Baptists' disciplining of other blacks, often beyond the scrutiny of white leaders.

At the same time, blacks' disciplinary practices and behavioral standards frequently coincided with those of whites, revealing a shared evangelical worldview that persisted within an increasingly segregated church. Randolph Ferguson Scully's assertion that black Baptists "preserved a space to create their own interpretations of evangelical principles by taking advantage of their white brethren's neglect for their own purposes," proves true in many cases. At the same time, however, Baptists of the two races continued to join forces in their "interpretations of evangelical principles."¹⁵ Black and white Christians alike condemned adultery, reported drunkenness, restored the repentant, and sought to keep peace among members. They jointly supported programs to spread evangelical teachings overseas and contributed funds to ensure the maintenance of their own and each other's church buildings and the salaries of their pastors. They agreed that all sinners of whatever race should repent and offer themselves for baptism in order to live with Christ in eternity.

Baptist churches thus serve as crucial sites for studying the relationships between nineteenth-century blacks and whites, and Tidewater Virginia offers rich opportunities for research. This region, where African slaves first set foot in the British colonies, by 1800 was home to an expanding number of interracial and black Baptist churches. Graced with a mixture of rural and urban areas—from the farms surrounding the James,

¹⁵ Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 235.

York, and Rappahannock Rivers, to the busy streets of Richmond, Petersburg, and Norfolk—the region’s counties also contained proportions of slaves, free blacks, and whites that were generally more balanced than in other parts of the state.¹⁶ The geographical and social diversity found in the antebellum, wartime, and postwar Tidewater fostered a wide variety of cross-racial exchanges and ecclesiastical policies, in addition to providing the region’s large number of black Baptists with opportunities for expanded leadership and autonomous fellowship.

A close study of local congregational records tells a far more complicated story about evangelical race relations than the traditional narrative. Church minute books trace how groups of white and black believers dealt with questions of church government, welcomed new converts, meted out discipline for errant members, upheld marriages of both free and enslaved congregants, and raised funds for and otherwise promoted evangelical causes. In a historiographical essay written in 1987, John Boles criticized seminal works on southern slavery and religion, such as Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and Raboteau’s *Slave Religion*, for neglecting to study church records in depth. Eleven years later, Beth Barton Schweiger echoed Boles’s concern by lamenting that many “stacks of denominational proceedings” and “sheaves of church records” had “barely been touched.” Consequently, concluded Schweiger, historians have reduced the variety of evangelical experiences and exchanges in the South to the flat catchall of “southern evangelicalism.”¹⁷ While the recent works of scholars such as Monica Najjar, Randolph

¹⁶ To compare county-by-county population statistics throughout the antebellum period, see Historical Census Browser, 2004. University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html> (accessed Nov. 15, 2012).

¹⁷ John B. Boles, “The Discovery of Southern Religious History,” in John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 510–48, particularly 518–20 and 533; Beth Barton Schweiger, with Mathews, Hill, and Boles, “Forum: Southern Religion,” 162. The

Scully, and Charles Irons have explored local church sources in more detail, particularly on the issue of race, the field is still ripe with possibility.

Divided into four large chapters, this dissertation studies the interaction and eventual separation of black and white Baptists in organized churches and associations. Rather than the “invisible institution” of the unincorporated slave fellowships and the “mission” work of white preachers on plantations, the highly *visible* churches examined here—mixed-race and all-black—were formally constituted and incorporated as members of larger Baptist district and state associations, to which local congregations sent informative periodic reports.¹⁸

Chapter 1 traces the persistence of biracial fellowship during the antebellum period, alongside the simultaneous rise of black leadership and autonomous religious activity. This chapter discusses how churches generally baptized and disciplined black and white members on equal terms, how churches and associations negotiated racial questions, how black men served in positions of leadership over black members—even after Nat Turner’s Rebellion—and how blacks increasingly gathered separately from white members.

The Tidewater’s antebellum black churches form the subject of Chapter 2. These organizations, located for the most part in urban areas, maintained significant freedoms

church records at the Virginia Baptist Historical Society in Richmond, Virginia, for example, are extensive. Michael Whitt of VBHS has also recently compiled a registry of approximately 50,000 names of slaves, free blacks, and whites drawn from the antebellum records of over two hundred Baptist churches in Virginia, which is available for public use.

¹⁸ See Levine, *Black Culture*, 41-43; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 152-288; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 169-72, and Donald G. Mathews, “The Methodist Mission to the Slaves, 1829-1844,” *Journal of American History* 51 (Mar. 1965), 615-31. Janet Duitsman Cornelius explores the interaction between the mission to the slaves and the development of the black church in *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South*; also see Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 106-15.

despite the encroachment of the state's racial restrictions and the intentions of reform-minded white ministers to heighten the supervision of black Christians in matters of doctrine and behavior. Black deacons directed most realms of church business—from membership applications to discipline—with limited involvement by whites. And even in churches with a strong white ministerial presence, such as that of Robert Ryland at First African, black leaders were able to work together with white ones to preserve a considerable degree of congregational sovereignty.

Chapter 3 connects the development of a national ideology of benevolent reform during the antebellum period to the views of Virginia white Baptists on the religious instruction of blacks. At their annual association meetings, white Baptists' discussions of black religious activity occurred alongside their promotions of temperance campaigns, Sabbath schools, ministerial education, missions, and evangelical literature. Although exhortations to extend supervision of black believers and formalize their religious instruction arose within a larger southern culture of slaveholding, their connections and resemblance to northern benevolent organizations is important. Even after southern Baptists split with their northern brethren over the issue of slavery in the 1840s, and their cries for the evangelization of slaves bolstered, in their minds, existing justifications for the institution, they remained part of a national reformist agenda that sought to bring order and discipline to all areas of society. Virginia black Baptists' participation in colonization, missions, charitable organizations, and other benevolent work demonstrates that this reformist mindset, while still divided along lines of region and race, incorporated a wide variety of churchgoers.

The final chapter examines the dramatic transformation of the Tidewater Baptist churches brought about by the Civil War and emancipation. Black members left the white-led churches in overwhelming numbers to join the existing black congregations or form new ones. Stunned by the social upheaval they were experiencing, white Baptists exhibited a variety of responses to the changes in their church populations. Some attempted to persuade black members to stay—albeit to continue as unequal members—while other whites wholeheartedly supported the move to separate. In some churches, blacks and whites worked together to ensure a smooth transition, while in others one or both groups simply washed their hands of the other. As they formed their own churches and associations, black leaders sought ordination and vigorously promoted education, both in Sabbath schools and day schools. They advocated moral purity in their congregations—from temperance to marital fidelity—as well as benevolent projects, demonstrating that, while increasingly separate from whites, black churches still shared the faith with them.

Relationships between black and white Baptists in the nineteenth century were indeed complex and riddled with contradictions. To say that positive exchanges and significant opportunities were able to exist under the overarching dominance of the racial hierarchy and the slaveholding ideology is by no means to paint a brighter picture of the South, but rather a clearer one. A doctrine of white supremacy did pervade the civil and ecclesiastical spheres in southern society, including the Baptist churches of Tidewater Virginia, but the vast array of human experiences reflected in local records reveals how this racial doctrine was, at times, subverted by another one.

Chapter 1: “The Right Hand of Fellowship”: Cross-Racial Ties, Moral Discipline, and Black Leadership in Tidewater Virginia’s Biracial Baptist Churches, 1800-1861

For most of his life, Samuel Ellison worshipped alongside fellow Baptists near his home in southeastern Virginia. Ellison served as a deacon of the Baptist Church in rural Charles City County in the early nineteenth century, in a congregation later known as Emmaus.¹ Overseeing the spiritual lives of men and women in his community, Ellison visited the sick, disciplined the errant, and encouraged the faint-hearted. In 1837, this aging deacon succumbed to hypothermia in the frigid temperatures of early January. The church clerk recorded the unexpected death of this “Poor old Brother,” and carefully noted that Ellison’s demise was “not from Intemperance.”² Evidently, Ellison’s reputation as an upright and trustworthy leader was secure among those who mourned him at Emmaus—a regard not diminished by the fact that Ellison was a free black man.

Along with fellow free black deacons Jerry Bailey and Pleasant Smith of Emmaus Church, and like many other African Americans, Samuel Ellison served as a religious leader in the slaveholding South in a congregation of slaves, free blacks, and whites. Despite oppressive legislation and rampant prejudice, southern black evangelicals experienced significant spiritual and social freedoms. And despite the racial divide, blacks and whites gathered in meaningful ways to celebrate God’s love and proclaim his

¹ This church moved from Charles City County to New Kent County sometime between 1817 and 1822 and changed its name to Emmaus Baptist Church in 1834. *Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, 1792-1841*, Aug. 1817, May 1834; *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association, Held at Emmaus, in New-Kent County, October 12th, 13th, and 14th, 1822* (Richmond, VA: Shepherd & Pollard, 1822), title page, 3, Virginia Baptist Historical Society, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter VBHS). The U.S. Federal Census of 1820 lists a free black man over the age of 45 named Sam Ellyson living in New Kent County. Ellyson’s household also included two free black children, and, intriguingly, a white woman. The census of 1830 also lists a Sam Ellyson of New Kent County, over the age of 55, but includes a free black woman in his household instead of a white woman. Unless the clerk made an error in 1820, it appears that Ellyson was at one time married to a white woman. Perhaps she died, and he then married the black woman before 1830.

² Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, membership roster.

gospel. The biracial church was the place where blacks and whites came closest to equality and unity in the antebellum South. As members of evangelical congregations, blacks and whites worshipped together, often listened to the same sermons, frequently contributed money to the same religious causes, and were immersed in the same baptismal waters. Biracial fellowship and Christian teachings fostered a sense of spiritual equality that granted a measure of dignity to enslaved and free blacks and thereby undermined the logic on which slavery and racism rested.

As African Americans entered Baptist churches in impressive numbers between 1800 and 1861—often at much higher rates than whites—evangelical leaders increasingly found ways to juggle slavery, racial prejudice, and Christian doctrine.³ In churches across the South, whites wrestled with how to evangelize and have fellowship with blacks while maintaining the existing social hierarchy. Scholars such as Charles Irons have demonstrated how white believers responded to the influx of black Christians with expanded supervision in order to convince the white southern public that evangelicalism did not threaten the social order. By the mid-nineteenth century, Irons writes, the relationship between white and black evangelicals had shifted dramatically from that of coreligionists to one characterized by “a constant posture of spiritual oversight” exercised

³ In Tidewater Virginia, the Dover and Portsmouth Baptist Associations did not begin recording membership by race until 1838 and 1847. In 1843, Dover reported a total membership of 12,055, and 7,591 of that number were black. By 1860, the total number had climbed to 19,338, 13,882 of whom were black. *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1843*, 14; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 28, VBHS. In 1847, the Portsmouth Association reported a total membership of 8,010, and 5,572 were black. By 1860, the total membership reached 9,431, with 4,338 black members. *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1847*, 20-21; *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1861*, insert, VBHS. For statistics of black and white Baptists in Virginia as a whole, see the annual minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, VBHS, and Reuben Edward Alley, *A History of Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist General Board, 1973), 161, 191-92. For statistics on black and white Baptists across the South, see Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 182-84.

by whites over blacks. Whites hoped that by bringing black Christians into churches with ordained white leadership, they could prevent slaves from hearing incendiary teachings. Yet of equal significance, as shown in this dissertation, is the fact that white attempts to regulate black evangelicalism actually tended to foster blacks' independence and prepare them to lead churches after emancipation. Just as strikingly, while whites did increasingly superintend black evangelicalism in the nineteenth century, both in church life and through state legislation, black leadership *and biracial fellowship* persisted in many cases.⁴

Free black and enslaved congregants assumed more positions of leadership in the black religious community as the century progressed. At times, black Christians experienced greater autonomy as white leaders turned over supervisory roles to black deacons, and as whites allowed—or sometimes forced—blacks to worship separately from whites. In many congregations, however, blacks and whites continued to attend worship services, baptisms, and church business meetings together. A close study of interracial churches in antebellum Virginia reveals how, despite changes in racial laws and ecclesiastical policies, Afro-Virginians, both in concert with whites and in all-black environments, remained important participants in church life.

⁴ Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 154-92, quotation on 20. While Irons acknowledges the preservation of black autonomy and leadership and lingering examples of biracial fellowship, he sees whites' interactions with and concessions to blacks ultimately as calculations that provided an "enormous boost" to proslavery Christianity and racial supervision, quotation on 190. See also Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974), 285-86, 291; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 136-84, 204; Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997 [orig. pub. Cambridge University Press, 1993]), 89-90; Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51-53; Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740-1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 214-32.

From the time of its emergence in Virginia in the mid-eighteenth century, the Baptist religion strongly attracted slaves and free blacks. Baptist theology emphasized repentance, a distinctive, personal rebirth experience, and baptism by immersion, followed by a life of emotionally expressive worship that reflected the convert's individual walk with Christ. Early Baptists sometimes embraced spiritual visions and miraculous healings as well, and church members were encouraged to share their divine experiences with the congregation. Any man who demonstrated a "calling" could preach if accepted by the church leadership; a formal education in theology was not required. African Americans appreciated this ebullient and egalitarian worship style, and they developed what Mechal Sobel has called an "Afro-Baptist Sacred Cosmos."⁵

Like their opposition to the elites' favored pastimes of drinking, dancing, and gambling, eighteenth-century Baptists' appeal to slaves and free blacks challenged the mores and dominance of the Anglican slaveholding gentry.⁶ Anglicans had made some attempts to evangelize slaves in the century and a half of contact with blacks, but their efforts proved sporadic and largely unsuccessful. Slaves and free blacks did not show much interest in the subdued, liturgical Anglican services. It was the vibrant, enthusiastic meetings of evangelicals that intrigued them. White Baptists welcomed blacks into their fellowship, baptized them into a spiritual rebirth, and shared church privileges of

⁵ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 80-82, 92-95, 139-80. For the historic debate on African survivals in African American religion, see Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1941), and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 1-19. See also Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860" *Journal of Negro History* 16 (Apr. 1931), 198-99; Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 82-85, and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4-92.

⁶ Rhys Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765-1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 31 (Jul. 1974), 346-68.

membership, communion, and discipline with them as Christian “brothers” and “sisters.” While they rarely viewed blacks as their social equals, white evangelicals did recognize a spiritual equality among all believers, and they rejected the strict hierarchy of the Anglican Church, one under which generally only the wealthy or the educated could lead.

Baptist preachers evangelized vigorously within slave communities, and by 1800, thousands of African Americans were pouring into the churches. The status of slaves and free blacks, and their interactions with whites, could vary significantly from one Baptist congregation to another, and the regional associations of Baptist churches in Virginia sometimes diverged considerably in their policies regarding blacks. These variations could develop because of the Baptist belief in congregational governance. Each local congregation operated autonomously and elected its own pastors, elders, and deacons, unlike the Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. A congregation in the latter traditions served as the lowest link in a hierarchical chain, operating under bishops, conferences, or synods. These governing councils could dictate church policies and appoint local leadership. In contrast, congregational governance meant that local churches appointed their own leaders. Baptist congregations did send delegates to district, state, and even national associations in order to maintain ties with other church bodies, but these associations could not exert ruling authority over local congregations.

While the Baptist associations served merely as advisory bodies, their influence did increase throughout the nineteenth century. If a congregation faced a crisis or started to diverge from accepted Baptist theology, an association might attempt to assist that church or appoint new leadership. The strongest measure an association could implement was to exclude a wayward church from its body, and this did happen from time to time.

But for the most part these periodic “boards of council” (meetings of delegates from congregations composing a given association) provided an opportunity to form regional connections, and to seek the counsel of other association members on various topics such as church discipline, monetary concerns, and, notably, racial policies.⁷

In 1835, the twenty-four Virginia Baptist associations encompassed 441 churches, with 55,602 members. Tidewater Virginia held the highest concentration of Baptists in the state. Founded in 1783, the Dover Baptist Association was one of the largest and oldest associations in Virginia; it originally incorporated churches east of Richmond, between the Rappahannock and James Rivers. In 1836, Dover boasted 17,169 members.⁸ The Portsmouth Baptist Association oversaw churches east of Richmond and south of the James River and reported 5,090 members in 1836. These two associations, which thus embraced 40 percent of the declared Baptists in Virginia, also included the highest percentages of enslaved and free black Baptists in the state; their records provide a wealth of information about the interactions between black and white evangelicals.⁹

During the later antebellum period and perhaps even before that, the number of black Baptists in Tidewater Virginia—some of them members of biracial churches and others of all-black congregations—significantly exceeded that of white members of the denomination. As they attempted to tighten their supervision of black congregants, the Dover and Portsmouth Associations began recording membership by race in 1838 and 1847, respectively. The Portsmouth Association contained slightly more blacks than

⁷ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1794*, 8-9, VBHS.

⁸ In 1843, the Dover Baptist Association split, and the Rappahannock Baptist Association took charge of the counties between the Rappahannock and York Rivers. The following year, Dover reported a membership of 11,909 and Rappahannock 14,175. *Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual Meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, Assembled at Richmond, Virginia, June 1-4, 1844*, 40, VBHS.

⁹ Statistics taken from *Proceedings of the... General Association of Virginia... 1835*, 8, VBHS; *Proceedings of the... General Association of Virginia... 1836*, 32, VBHS.

whites in 1847, while Dover claimed twice as many blacks as whites in the same year. There were about 4,500 slaves and free blacks in the Portsmouth Association that year, almost 1,400 of whom attended biracial churches. In 1848, Dover reported a black membership of around nine thousand, and some two thirds of that number were members of biracial churches. While the number of Afro-Virginians attending all-black churches would continue to climb in the years leading up to the Civil War, about half of the black Baptists in these two associations would remain in churches with whites before 1861.¹⁰

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Baptist associations expanded their influence by overseeing a host of missionary, educational, and other benevolent societies. Particularly in the 1840s and 1850s, they focused much of their attention on the systematic evangelization of African Americans, attempting to standardize Baptist racial policies and exhorting constituent churches to provide regular instruction for enslaved members. Association leaders in this period sought to rein in the independence of all-black churches by appointing white pastors and white delegates to represent these churches, and by insisting that black congregations place themselves under the authority of neighboring, white-led churches. So it was that, while these multi-congregational Baptist associations still identified themselves as “advisory” conferences, their oversight of black Baptists intensified in the antebellum period. White and black church leaders usually submitted to associations’ recommendations, both to avoid exclusion and out of a

¹⁰ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1847*, 20-21, VBHS; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1847*, 5, VBHS; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1848*, 3-4, VBHS. By 1856, Portsmouth had a black membership of 4,237 and a white membership of 3,675; Dover still contained a staggering black majority: 10,694 blacks to 5,214 whites. Approximately 40% of the black members of the Portsmouth Association and approximately 60% of those in the Dover Association still worshipped at a biracial church in 1856. *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1856*, 14-15, VBHS; *Minutes of the... Dover Baptist Association...1856*, 3-5, VBHS.

belief that unity was necessary to advance what they saw as Christ's kingdom in their communities.

One of a given Baptist association's primary duties lay in the formation of new churches. When a local congregation emerged, usually as an offshoot of an established church, it had to apply to the nearest association for recognition. The delegates could vote to incorporate or reject the new church. Sometimes the delegates asked a given congregation to wait and reapply if they felt it lacked organization, leadership, or adequate membership. The associations continued throughout the antebellum period to recognize (or sometimes deny recognition to) biracial and all-black churches, although by the 1840s, they required black churches to apply for admission through white delegates.

The regional associations not only possessed limited authority; they met only once a year. Local congregations operated under the leadership of their own elders and deacons. A congregation's voting membership—usually its white male members, but occasionally blacks and white women also—elected these men to office. A church could function without a regular pastor, and that happened often. Elders could serve in various capacities, including the performance of a pastor's duties, which ranged from preaching and exhorting to administering communion. Deacons commonly played more practical roles; they could manage the church's finances, maintain the church building, tend to the sick, collect contributions for the poor, and oversee the disciplining of disobedient members. Deacons might also exhort (speaking before the congregation without expounding doctrine) and pray publicly, especially in the absence of a pastor or elders.¹¹

The Dover Baptist Association recommended that only the "faithful and well qualified,"

¹¹ For a discussion of the difference between preaching and other forms of public speaking in Baptist churches, see Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 86.

and those “full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom,” should fill the offices of leadership.¹²

Many churches ascribed those qualities not only to free blacks, but also to slaves, whom they elected as deacons to supervise black members throughout the antebellum period, offering a measure of autonomy and leadership to groups denied those opportunities elsewhere in society.

Of all the duties of Baptist leaders, church discipline received the most attention. Disciplinary action generally followed a set pattern. Any member of the church could cite another member for behavior contrary to Biblical law. Frequent offenses included adultery, intemperance, theft, lying, fighting, dancing, gambling, or attending a non-Baptist church. Baptists found all kinds of deviant acts with which to charge one other; even listening to fiddle music or playing backgammon might land someone in a church court. After hearing his or her citation from a visiting elder or deacon, the accused member could then offer a confession or a defense before the church. The congregation would vote to retain the offender in fellowship or to exclude him or her from the church.¹³ Those cast off could later appeal for restoration, and, based on their evaluation of that person’s repentance, the church members might accept him or her back into the fold.

Evangelicals took their fraternal titles seriously; in many ways, Baptist churches functioned as close-knit families. As a Christian “brother” or “sister,” a church member held the right to involve himself or herself in the personal lives of other congregants, and

¹² “The Duties of Deacons,” in *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1841*, 12-15, VBHS.

¹³ See Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 17-25, 28-49, for a helpful overview of the purpose and process of Baptist discipline. Antebellum Baptists seem to have used the words “exclude,” “expel,” and “excommunicate” interchangeably. Different churches preferred one term over another. Lesser offenses might result in a suspension instead, in which a convicted person retained his status as a member but could not partake in church “privileges,” such as communion, for a time. Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 41-44.

all Baptists implicitly submitted to the leadership of the elders and the discipline of the church. For many evangelicals, the church provided a space to worship God, form lasting ties of fellowship, and encourage one another in the faith. And all church members, black and white, needed to follow the same path to baptism: conviction and confession of sin, an acceptance of God's grace, and a public proclamation of personal experience with and faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Despite growing racial divisions and restrictions, most evangelicals recognized that, ultimately, black and white Christians stood as equals before God. Because this fact formed the basis of their interactions, evangelicals carved out a unique space of biracial fellowship amid a thoroughly white supremacist society.

In churches across the region, dozens of black men and women applied for baptism each year, especially during peak revival periods such as the 1850s. The Dover Association reported in 1859 that several congregations had experienced a decrease in the number of whites being baptized, while baptisms of blacks continued to multiply.¹⁵ Whites often felt unprepared for the influx of Afro-Christians, and they increasingly seated blacks in separate sections of the church or even established separate meeting times. These attempts both revealed and fostered a growth of racism in Virginia's churches, yet, at the same time, they encouraged religious autonomy among blacks.

Despite the expansion of racism and segregation within the Baptist community, however, black and white evangelicals enjoyed the same privilege of baptism throughout the antebellum years. A person could apply for membership in a church in two ways:

¹⁴ For study of the differences between the conversion experiences of slaves and "plain-folk" whites, see Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., "Religion, Society, and Culture in the Old South: A Comparative View," *American Quarterly* 26 (Oct. 1974), 399-416.

¹⁵ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1859*, 25, VBHS.

either with an approved letter of “dismission” from another Baptist church or through a public confession of an “experience of grace” followed by a baptismal ceremony. Prospective members, black and white, would “present themselves” for baptism, demonstrating their freedom to make such a commitment to a church. During a meeting at Shoulder’s Hill Church of Nansemond County in September 1836, for instance, four white women, three female slaves, and one free black woman were all received for baptism in “like manner.”¹⁶ At Portsmouth Baptist, blacks Fanny Allen, Thomas Tabb, Moses Griffith, Cain Davis, and Henry Rise “presented themselves” by giving a “satisfactory account of the Lords dealing with them” in 1841.¹⁷ The church voted unanimously to accept them as members. When Shoulder’s Hill opened the floor for baptismal candidates in November 1846, a black man named Samuel Rix “came forward and related an experience of grace on his heart.” The members voted to receive him.¹⁸ During these examinations, whites listened attentively and seriously to black people’s conversion narratives. Although it does not appear that blacks were permitted to vote on whether to accept white candidates, church members of both races attributed legitimacy to one another’s religious experiences by regarding one another as brethren in the faith.¹⁹

Just as Baptist congregations applied certain standards for joining a church, members could only leave a church in three ways: a letter of dismissal addressed to a

¹⁶ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1783-1907, Sept. 1836, VBHS.

¹⁷ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1853, Jan. 10, 1841, VBHS. The minutes only identified this group of converts as “persons of colour” and did not indicate whether they were enslaved or free.

¹⁸ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1869, Nov. 1846, VBHS.

¹⁹ Church minutes were often unclear on whether black members voted in the cases of white candidates; additionally, the lack of uniformity in Baptist policies makes it impossible to say that blacks never voted in white cases.

new church, disciplinary exclusion, or death.²⁰ In March 1840, at Elam Baptist in Sussex County, “Sister Mary Cooper, being about to move out of this State,” applied for and received a letter of dismissal. That same month, “Sister” Lucretia Biard received a letter before moving to Ohio.²¹ Cooper was white, Biard a free black woman. Many other blacks and whites left the congregation in the same manner. Church leaders sometimes overlooked regulations concerning dismissal letters. When Andrew Faulk, a free black man, failed to procure a letter from his former church in Philadelphia, Suffolk Baptist voted unanimously to receive him anyway in 1851, recognizing that “he had been residing in Suffolk for several years past, during which time his Christian deportment had been uniformly good.”²² Faulk’s acceptance thus depended on his reputation in the community rather than on fulfillment of the requirement to present a letter from his former congregation.

Interestingly enough, some blacks desired to remain in biracial churches even if an all-black church had been established nearby. Second Baptist of Richmond passed a ruling in 1841 that required black applicants to attend the city’s newly formed African Church. Yet the church minutes continued to report the activities of black deacons at Second Baptist itself. Apparently, the church allowed its original black congregants to stay but did not wish to admit any new black members. When Richard Balentine, the brother of a respected black deacon, applied for membership in 1842, the white leaders made an exception and baptized him into the biracial congregation. The church also

²⁰ Nonattendance could lead to exclusion, especially if the church paid careful attention to its membership records. Some churches formally excluded members who stopped coming, while others simply scratched out their names. Some churches, however, neglected to purge their rolls of non-attenders. For one church’s attendance policy, see Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 29, 1838.

²¹ Elam (Seacock) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1832-1907, Mar. 1840, VBHS.

²² Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1854, Mar. 1851, VBHS.

made such an exception for a bondwoman named Harriet, whose mistress desired her admittance. The clerk described Harriet as “a very favorite & excellent servant” who had already been “very active in promoting the interests of this ch[urch].”²³ These two cases evince different avenues by which African Americans entered Baptist congregations. Some blacks, like Richard Balentine, took an active role seeking church membership. Others, like Harriet, were encouraged—or perhaps even compelled—to attend by their evangelical masters.

The amount of influence a master held over his or her slaves’ religious activities not only varied from household to household, but also from congregation to congregation, since the regional Baptist associations could not legislate. Some congregational leaders required slaves to obtain permission from their masters to become members. Only a few of the Baptist congregations in eastern Virginia actually passed formal rulings in this regard: Boar Swamp in Henrico County, as early as 1806; Colosse of King William County, in 1827; and Tucker’s Swamp, Southampton County, in 1859.²⁴ Other congregations acted differently from one situation to the next. A clerk might note that a slave had his or her master’s consent when baptized, as when one Alice brought written permission from Colonel George Blow to Raccoon Swamp Church, Sussex County, in 1838.²⁵ A.W. Nolting rescinded the permission he had given his slaves to receive baptism at Berea Church of Hanover County in 1850, writing that they “have not

²³ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1820-1843, Jul. 28 and May 25, 1842, VBHS.

²⁴ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1787-1828, Apr. 1806, VBHS; Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, 1814-1834, Nov. 1827, VBHS; Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1858-1906, Jun. 11, 1859, Jan. 29, 1860, VBHS.

²⁵ Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1837-1892, Jun. 10, 1838, VBHS. For other examples, see Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1894, Mar. 11, 1831, Nov. 1833, and Jul. 15, 1860, VBHS; Taylorsville Baptist Church Minute Book, 1841-1861, Jul. 10, 1852, VBHS.

been behaving as well as formerly,” and he withdrew “any consent until their behavior makes [them] more worthy of it.” The church leaders agreed to honor his request.²⁶

More often than not, however, in the hundreds of slave baptisms recorded in this region, the church minutes made no mention of a slaveholder’s authorization.²⁷ The fact that more Baptist congregations in this region did not enact coherent regulations on slave baptisms or explicitly record that slaves had permission suggests that, though evangelical leaders insisted on the importance of racial supervision, many white Baptists neglected to fully incorporate this ideology into their everyday practices.

What appeared to matter more to church leaders than whether a bondman had his master’s approbation was whether he had proper theological preparation for baptism. The Dover and Portsmouth Association minutes brim with concerns regarding the religious instruction of slaves and free blacks. By the 1840s and 1850s, as Baptist practices became more standardized, and as the associations gained more influence, delegates to the latter pondered ways to increase their supervision of Afro-Christianity.²⁸

These discussions sometimes filtered down into local churches. Upper King and Queen expressed a “deep and growing concern” for the “incoherent and frequently unscriptural character of the religious exercises related by the colored people” seeking baptism. The white church leadership paternalistically asserted its willingness to “make every proper allowance for the ignorance of the colored people” while still remaining faithful to the “fundamental truths of the Gospel.” The congregation voted that if, in giving their own account of their religious experience, blacks failed to “make any

²⁶ Berea Baptist Church Minute Book, 1846-1855, Jul. 1850, VBHS.

²⁷ Second Baptist Church sometimes indicated a master’s permission, but often did not. On September 17, 1837, the clerk recorded the baptism of seven slaves—five had “by permission” written next to their names; two did not. Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book.

²⁸ This topic is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

allusion to the Savior,” their applications for membership would be rejected. Simple answers to the pastor’s series of questions would no longer suffice.²⁹ Church leaders understood it as their duty to instruct prospective slave members, and they voted to provide “special meetings” in which the pastor could, “in the plainest and most familiar manner possible,” explain the “leading truths and precepts of the Gospel” to African Americans seeking baptism. Summing up its position, the congregation resolved that it would “endeavor to maintain a more watchful and strict discipline, than heretofore among our colored members.”³⁰ Nevertheless, this particular congregation waited until 1859 to establish such requirements, and most churches did not pass formal regulations for slave baptisms at all.

Black deacons exercised some influence over the baptisms of slaves and free blacks. While some churches, such as Moore’s Swamp in Surry County, required that applicants be examined by an elder or deacon—presumably white—with at least two white males present, most churches did not pass such explicit requirements.³¹ Some churches clearly allowed black leaders to judge candidates, however. First Baptist of Richmond delineated the duties of its black deacons in 1827, including their role in admitting blacks into the church. When they learned that a black person wanted to join, the black deacons would call a meeting of black members in order to hear the “experience” of the applicant. Anyone attending that gathering could object to the

²⁹ While church minutes do not record similar concerns about whites’ “ignorance,” all applicants, white and black, needed to provide “satisfactory evidence” of repentance and belief in Christ, as stated in church constitutions like that of Beulah Baptist. Beulah Baptist Church Minute Book, 1832-1852, Beulah Baptist Church Constitution, Article 2, VBHS.

³⁰ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1855-1897, May 14, 1859, VBHS.

³¹ Moore’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1818-1855, “Rules of Decorum,” passed Aug. 22, 1818, VBHS. It does not appear that Moore’s Swamp formally appointed black men to the diaconate, but it did appoint black men to “overlook” the black members—a similar role. Moore’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 8, 1826, Sept. 16, 1842.

candidate's admission, and if the black deacons deemed this objection "reasonable," they would deny membership.³² The white leaders of Second Baptist Church of Richmond passed a similar resolution in July of 1831, requiring "a favorable report" from a committee of black leaders before hearing the application of any black person.³³

Whites at Shoulder's Hill took an even more relaxed approach and simply "confirmed" the decisions of the black members without performing their own examination of the candidates.³⁴ Thus, while whites still held the final say on church membership, blacks played a crucial advisory role in the process in some congregations. Occasionally white leaders even neglected to record the baptisms of black members, which may bespeak a measure of white indifference to black affairs, even as it also evinces a disinclination on the part of some white Baptists to exercise the increased oversight of blacks that other whites were demanding. When several slaves requested letters of dismission from Hopeful Church of Hanover County in 1848, white leaders sought the counsel of black deacon "brother Ralph" to "see if he recollect[ed] their being baptized in the fellowship of this church."³⁵ Rather than reexamine the slaves themselves, the whites evidently trusted Ralph enough to take his word.

There is no doubt that inequities existed in the ways blacks and whites became members of Baptist churches. And, as the century wore on, blacks and whites increasingly attended separate baptismal ceremonies. But Baptist churches still offered the "right hand of fellowship" to new members both black and white.³⁶ And the crowds

³² First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1825-1830, Apr. 17, 1827, VBHS.

³³ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 23, 1831.

³⁴ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 1857.

³⁵ Hopeful Baptist Church Minute Book, 1815-1854, Aug. 12, 1848, VBHS.

³⁶ For examples of this phrase in reference to black members, see Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, May 14, 1833 and Aug. 11, 1833; Hopeful Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 28, 1842; Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1848-1884, Sept. 12, 1858, VBHS.

at many baptisms continued to include black and white faces, as when the Hanover County congregation of Taylorsville Baptist “repaired to the River,” and “in the presence of a very large and solemn assembly,” the pastor baptized four whites and thirty-six slaves on a Sunday in 1842.³⁷

Aside from membership applications, no other subject took up more time at church business meetings than discipline. As historian Gregory Wills demonstrates, in exercising discipline Baptists sought the “honor of God,” the purity and unity of the church, and the “good of the offender.”³⁸ Churches would generally hold monthly business—or “conference”—meetings on Saturday evenings, although larger congregations sometimes needed to meet more often. These meetings would cover a range of topics: requests for baptism and membership or for letters of dismissal, amendments to church governance, election of elders, deacons, and association delegates, budgetary concerns, and, most frequently, citations and trials of deviant members.

Blacks and whites generally faced church discipline in equal measure, with congregations practicing, according to Wills, “egalitarian authority” to a degree that “could shock other southerners.”³⁹ Discrepancies would more often appear along lines of gender rather than of race. White and black men seemed to get into more trouble than women of either race—or at least the churches were more likely to bring the faults of

³⁷ Taylorsville Baptist Church Minute Book, May 22, 1842. For other interracial baptisms, see Beulah Baptist Church Minute Book, 1812-1832, Nov. 9, 1831 (eight blacks, nine whites), VBHS; Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1772-1837, Aug. 9, 1835 (three blacks, one white), Library of Virginia (hereafter LVA); Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1833-1846, Oct. 23, 1842 (three blacks, thirty-seven whites), VBHS; Fairfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1844-1906, Oct. 10, 1847 (five blacks, eight whites), Oct. 10, 1863 (fifteen whites, nine blacks), VBHS; North West Baptist Church Minute Book, 1841-1869, Oct. 30, 1856 (seven blacks, thirty-one whites), and Aug. 12, 1859, (six blacks, seventeen whites), VBHS.

³⁸ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 31.

³⁹ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 50.

male members to light.⁴⁰ Perhaps this was due to the fact that church leaders viewed men as spiritual authorities in their own households; thus, members might not want to threaten the privacy of a home to cite those men's wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters.

Regardless, it appears that that in at least some times and places discipline was meted out more often to white members than to blacks. At Beulah Baptist in King William County, 10 percent of white males and 1 percent of white females were excluded from fellowship between 1812 and 1832. The church excluded 8 percent of male slaves and 3 percent of female slaves during those years. In the following twenty years, Beulah excluded 12 percent of white males, 5 percent of white females, 6 percent of enslaved males, and 3 percent of enslaved females.⁴¹

Just as the numbers of exclusions reveal similarities in the disciplining of slaves and whites, so does the propensity or reluctance of the churches to forgive offenses. Between 1820 and 1865, Enon Baptist of Essex County expelled approximately 14 percent of its white male membership and less than 4 percent of its white female membership. About 25 percent of the enslaved males and 13 percent of the enslaved females were excluded during that time. Those numbers present a significant racial discrepancy in favor of whites, yet the rate of restoration to membership is also important. About 22 percent of white males and 8 percent of white females who had

⁴⁰ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 50-66. According to Wills, who studied the disciplinary records of Baptist churches in Georgia, men were cited for discipline more often than women, but women—seen as “protector[s] of morality”—were treated more severely when convicted, facing higher percentages of excommunication, pp. 54-59; Jean E. Friedman makes a similar conclusion for evangelical churches in North Carolina and Georgia, arguing that men were more likely to be cited for “lesser offenses,” such as drinking and disorderly conduct, while women more frequently faced charges for “serious” offenses, such as adultery and fornication. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 11-18.

⁴¹ Beulah Baptist Church Minute Book, 1812-1832 and 1832-1852, membership rosters. Church clerks almost certainly neglected to record members' baptisms, exclusions, or restorations from time to time; thus, these numbers are approximated.

been excluded reentered the church. In contrast, the church restored 35 percent of the excluded enslaved males and 18 percent of the enslaved females.⁴² Slaves were also restored more often than whites at Tucker's Swamp and Upper King and Queen Churches. Half of the excluded black men at these churches regained their membership.⁴³ These figures reveal that blacks often cared deeply about returning to church, since they would need to "present themselves" for restoration just as they had done for baptism. And church leaders were willing to accept them back into the fold if they seemed genuinely repentant.

Although the rosters of free blacks in biracial churches were often kept only sporadically, it appears that most churches disciplined this group at a somewhat higher rate than slaves and whites. This may demonstrate an inherent racism among white evangelicals, which led them to feel a need to supervise this "masterless" group of black men and women. On the other hand, many churches in the area appointed free black men as deacons or to other positions of authority to enforce Christian lifestyles among black members. Perhaps their prominence and their role as liaisons between white and black members made it difficult for their transgressions to go unnoticed or unchecked. Like white and enslaved congregants, however, many free blacks who had been excluded appealed to the churches for restoration. Half the free black men and women excluded

⁴² Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, 1820-1874, membership roster, VBHS. Enon's membership list extended into the 1870s, making it difficult to say exactly what percentage of whites were excluded before 1865. The number of slave exclusions, however, clearly occurred before 1865.

⁴³ Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1818-1857, membership roster, VBHS; Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1836-1855, membership roster, VBHS; Wills also discusses how churches were quicker to restore blacks to membership than whites. Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 64.

from Enon Baptist Church between 1820 and 1865 sought and obtained reconciliation with the church.⁴⁴

As in other realms of church government, discipline cases were decided by majority vote. While the associations lacked the power to impose a uniform policy on the franchise, the Dover Association recommended as early as 1802 that its churches restrict voting rights to free male members. In a circular letter that year, delegates Robert Semple and James Greenwood extended the apostle Paul's injunction that women remain silent in church to "servants and minor sons."⁴⁵ Since these groups lived under the authority of others, they seldom had "an opportunity of acquiring a tolerable share of knowledge," nor could they be "sufficiently independent to give an impartial decision." Additionally, the "many inconveniences and embarrassments" of the system of slavery—namely civil and social restrictions on slaves—made Dover "doubly cautious upon the subject." Semple and Greenwood were careful to point out, however, that all groups were "equally entitled" to church ordinances, such as baptism and communion, and that women, slaves, and minor sons could participate in church discipline by monitoring, admonishing, and citing fellow members.⁴⁶

While Dover's recommendation seemed to leave free black men a voice in church government, the practices of local churches varied across Tidewater Virginia and fluctuated throughout the antebellum period. Mattaponi vested church governance in the hands of its "free male members," permitting non-voting members only to "assist in the

⁴⁴ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, membership roster. Twelve out of a total of twenty-nine free black men were excluded; the church restored six of that number. Eight out of a total of thirty-five free black women were excluded; the church restored three of that number.

⁴⁵ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1802*, "Circular Letter," 8-11; part of the circular letter was torn out of VBHS's copy of the 1802 minutes, but a complete version can be found on microfilm at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library. For scripture reference on the restriction of women's speech in church, see 1 Corinthians 14:34.

⁴⁶ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1802*, "Circular Letter," 8-11.

discipline as witnesses, and in preparing matters for decision, and giving any necessary information.” At least ten free black men were members of Mattaponi, and the church’s policy suggests that they could have voted. This church’s constitution also permitted free female members to vote in the election of a pastor.⁴⁷ One wonders whether that included the five free black women who were members.⁴⁸ Since Smithfield contained a “very small number of white male members,” these men considered it their “privilege and duty” to extend suffrage to the “white female members” in 1837, clearly indicating that this congregation’s sizeable black majority had no official voice in church government.⁴⁹

The constitutions of Beulah and Bruington Churches also incorporated all free male members in church governance.⁵⁰ When Berea Church organized in 1846, it ruled that “a majority of the members present” at church meetings would govern in all cases, except in amending the constitution, which would require a majority of two thirds of the white males.⁵¹ At least in theory, white women and blacks could vote during discipline cases and elections. Definitive evidence that these policies were applied as written is rare, but one such instance is found at Four Mile Creek, which clearly involved all members in governance when its leaders requested “everyone male & female white and coloured” to vote in the election of Pastor Thomas Binford in 1841.⁵²

Some churches seem to have changed their voting policies over time. In the early nineteenth century, Charles City seems to have counted the votes of free black deacons

⁴⁷ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, 1828-1844, Mattaponi Baptist Church Constitution, Article 3, in W.T. Hundley, *History of Mattaponi Baptist Church: King and Queen County, Virginia* (Richmond: Appeals Press, 1928).

⁴⁸ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, membership rosters, 1833-1842 and 1842-1845.

⁴⁹ Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 30, 1837.

⁵⁰ Beulah Baptist Church Minute Book, Beulah Baptist Church Constitution, Article 7; Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, “Rules of the Church,” May 6, 1815.

⁵¹ Berea Baptist Church Minute Book, Berea Baptist Church Constitution, Article 9.

⁵² Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 20, 1841.

such as Samuel Ellison and Jerry Bailey—at least sometimes—even in disciplining white members.⁵³ In 1840, however, the church drew up a new constitution that required a majority of white males to pass any resolution.⁵⁴ While this measure did not incontrovertibly disfranchise blacks in all matters, it definitely marked a deepening policy of racial discrimination. Other churches, such as Upper King and Queen, clearly dictated in the 1850s that only white males would govern. This congregation did not “deem it proper” that slaves and free blacks “should bear rule in church,” but even this church stated that, on issues concerning blacks, it would “be well to consult them.”⁵⁵

Likewise, the Dover and Portsmouth Associations followed different racial policies in their activities on the associational level. In 1842, Portsmouth amended its constitution to allow only white males to serve as delegates.⁵⁶ Dover did not mention race in its constitution until 1866, when it decreed that all representatives must be white.⁵⁷ African American men including Samuel Brown and Moses Moore represented their churches at the Dover Association up until the Civil War.⁵⁸ If these two regional associations could not agree on the role of race in governance, it is not surprising that the area’s Baptist congregations adopted widely divergent practices which evolved differently over the years. While most churches seemed to increase restrictions in the

⁵³ See Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. and Mar. 1817, for reasonable evidence of this. Five white deacons and five black deacons attended the February meeting, and two more whites attended in March. When voting in a discipline case against a white man, the group ruled with a majority of two in February and four in March. In order to obtain such a majority, more than five members probably would have voted, unless one white man chose to abstain.

⁵⁴ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, 1856-1871, Emmaus Baptist Church Constitution, Articles 2 and 3, 1840.

⁵⁵ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1855-1897, Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Constitution, Article 2.

⁵⁶ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1842*, 6, VBHS.

⁵⁷ *Minutes of the... Dover Baptist Association... 1866*, 31, VBHS.

⁵⁸ The Brown family had represented the all-black Elam Baptist Church at the Dover Association for decades. Moses Moore represented the newly formed Chickahominy African Church, James City County, in 1859. *Minutes of the... Dover Baptist Association... 1858*, 8-12; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1859*, 14-19, VBHS.

antebellum period, others extended more freedoms to black members. As late as 1854, Glebe Landing explicitly allowed all black members, free and slave, to vote with the white members “in any matter of business among themselves,” such as receiving and disciplining members.⁵⁹

Although it appears that the voting members generally had exclusive authority to exclude members, the entire congregation might observe and participate in the proceedings.⁶⁰ A case at Mattaponi in 1846 illustrates the role that black leaders often played in the process: “The Committee who instruct the coloured brethren reported that they had, after strict investigation into the late conduct and christian deportment, together with the approbation of the coloured brethren, restored to the fellowship of the Church John, belonging to bro. Lewis Jeffries; Robert, belonging to brother Robert Courtney and Anthony, belonging to brother John R. Haynes, which report is confirmed by the Church.”⁶¹ Black leaders could have an important say in exclusions and restorations, but the voting members, most often only white men, held ultimate authority.

Just as they often underwent discipline at roughly similar rates, blacks and whites frequently committed similar types of offenses. Fornication and drunkenness topped the list for both groups, although blacks were more commonly cited for the former and whites the latter. Baptist leaders frowned upon the use of alcohol, and they frequently exhorted their congregations to abstain entirely. Widespread alcohol abuse plagued families in the nineteenth century, and evangelical publications railed against this vice. Temperance groups emerged in many communities throughout the nation, and churches

⁵⁹ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, 1825-1865, Jan. 1854, VBHS.

⁶⁰ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 51-54.

⁶¹ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1854, Jul. 11, 1846.

tightened their watch over the habits of their congregants.⁶² Providence Baptist of Caroline County expelled dozens of whites for intemperance in the 1840s and 1850s, as members of this congregation continually reported one another for imbibing.⁶³

The clerk of Emmaus Baptist, a white man named B.M. Kenzie, lamented to the church in 1841 that he had, “under the power of overwhelmed distress, mingled with great perplexity of mind,” fallen into intemperance. Having “gone counter to the will of God” and having “injured the feelings of the church,” Kenzie asked for, and received, the church’s pardon.⁶⁴ At Tucker’s Swamp, white brother Jeremiah Stephenson begged forgiveness for having become inebriated. The church kept him in fellowship until they found out a few months later that he was again “making too free use of ardent spirits.” He was then unanimously expelled from membership.⁶⁵ Toney, a slave at Shoulder’s Hill, was cited for intoxication in 1830 and “acknowledged the correctness of the charge.” The church forgave Toney after giving him a “public reproof and admonition” to warn other members, applying the apostle Paul’s exhortation to rebuke sinners “before all, that others also may fear.”⁶⁶

While they did receive citations for intemperance, slaves especially struggled with charges of adultery. Since the civil government did not respect the legality of their marriages, and since slaveholders had the power to separate man and wife, bondmen and –women were sometimes prevented from sustaining monogamous relationships. If a

⁶² Black and white Virginia Baptists’ involvement in the temperance movement is discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. See also Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979); Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989).

⁶³ Providence Baptist Church Minute Book, 1840-1856, VBHS.

⁶⁴ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 1841.

⁶⁵ Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 8 and Sept. 7, 1838.

⁶⁶ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, May 1830. 1 Tim. 5:20 (King James Version). As another example, Shoulder’s Hill restored two white men and one enslaved man to fellowship after they made public confessions and resolved to abstain from “ardent spirits” at a meeting on March 15, 1838.

master sold a slave's spouse, and that slave attempted to remarry, he or she might end up before a church court. Baptist leaders attempted to make some allowances for slaves' tragic circumstances. In 1793, the Dover Association advised the churches to "act discretionally" in responding to marital separations, since slaves would not "have it in their power to discharge the mutual duties of man and wife."⁶⁷ That same year, delegates to the Portsmouth Association discussed how to deal with church members "who shall directly, or indirectly, separate married Slaves." After a lengthy debate, a majority of the delegates thought the question "so difficult" that "no answer could be given it."⁶⁸ Evidently, some delegates thought churches should discipline slaveholders for violating marital unions, while others were hesitant to interfere with masters' prerogatives.

Individual congregations were thus left to debate the topic on their own. In 1826, Upper King and Queen considered passing a resolution to "prevent professors of religion [i.e., congregants] from parting man and wife among their slaves," but finally thought it best not to establish a rule on the matter. They instead voted to judge each case separately. If a slaveholder practiced "any immorality" in regard to slave marriages, the church should "call on the offender" and "deal with him at their discretion."⁶⁹ Such tepid rulings tended to recognize the authority of masters over the rights of the enslaved, and local church records do not offer evidence that masters actually faced disciplinary action for this offense. Yet the fact that churches held debates and considered discipline on the topic at all demonstrates some regard for the marital vows of Afro-Christian couples.

Even though they failed to draw up a unified policy to protect slave marriages against the stresses imposed by slavery, Baptists continued to recognize these covenants

⁶⁷ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1793*, 4, VBHS.

⁶⁸ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association*, 1793, 4, VBHS.

⁶⁹ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1815-1836, Jan. 1826, VBHS.

throughout the nineteenth century. Given that state law took “no notice” of such unions, the Dover Association recommended that the churches “adopt some rule by which it may be known, when any [slave] who is a member, takes a husband or wife,” in order to prevent “many unpleasant things, that sometimes take place, among that description of Church members,” namely, accusations of adultery.⁷⁰ As for cases of infidelity among enslaved couples, Dover advised that if the church “judge[d] the fornication clearly proven,” it could pronounce a divorce and “permit such to marry again.” By contrast, free people would need to have divorces “sanctioned” by the civil law—something that rarely happened in Old Virginia—before they could remarry.⁷¹ In order to discipline infidelity, churches would often attempt to keep track of slave marriages, as they did with the marriages of free persons. First Baptist ruled in 1827 that the clerk should begin recording the names of all enslaved couples.⁷² These efforts at disciplining and recordkeeping demonstrate how Baptists continually supported in substantial ways the sanctity of slave unions.

Evangelical churches thus essentially took the place of the state in establishing and dissolving the marriages of their enslaved members. Wicomoco Baptist of Northumberland County decreed in 1807 that no black member could “cohabit with any person as a wife or husband until they have in the presence of at least two other members of this church, made mutual vows of constancy until death or removal.”⁷³ In King and Queen County, Bruington Church’s constitution acknowledged that enslaved members were often “unavoidably parted” from their husbands and wives; therefore, they “should

⁷⁰ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1817*, 14, VBHS.

⁷¹ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1819*, 5, VBHS.

⁷² First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 30, 1827.

⁷³ Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1804-1847, Aug. 1807, VBHS.

not be deemed disorderly if they marry again.”⁷⁴ Colosse adopted Bruington’s ruling into its own church regulations.⁷⁵ In 1812, after learning of the practices of other churches in regard to slave marriages, Boar Swamp reconsidered its ruling to exclude an enslaved man named Anderson for leaving his “lawful wife and taking an other [sic] woman.” When Anderson did not reply to the church’s invitation to discuss the matter, however, he remained excluded from fellowship.⁷⁶ These decisions evince a striking duality: Baptist congregations acknowledged slaves’ right to remarry after an unavoidable separation, while at the same time recognizing a master’s right to separate husband and wife. This duality wove itself throughout the interactions of white and black evangelicals—white members defended the dignity of black members’ spiritual and familial lives, and somehow still managed to support slaveholders’ “right” to treat blacks as movable property.

Certain churches sought to regulate how and when blacks could unite in matrimony. In 1836, Glebe Landing of Middlesex County decreed that “no coloured member” could marry without the church’s permission. At the same meeting, the congregation selected black leaders to “perform the rights of matrimony” for blacks who wished to marry.⁷⁷ Several years later, the congregation ruled it the “duty” of the black deacons to report when a black couple wanted to wed, so church leaders could make an “enquiry”—probably to ascertain whether there were any impediments to the marriage.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1816-1831, Bruington Baptist Church Constitution, Article 8, VBHS.

⁷⁵ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, 1814-1834, “Copy of the Rules of Bruington Church,” Rule 8.

⁷⁶ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1812 and Jul. 1814.

⁷⁷ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 12, 1836.

⁷⁸ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 1843. While churches did not pass specific rulings to regulate the unions of white members, they did oversee all marriages in the congregation when monitoring marital fidelity, and both blacks and whites would have had a difficult time obtaining the

While still exercising control over slave marriages, Glebe Landing allowed its black deacons significant spiritual oversight. By this point, state laws prohibited blacks from preaching and exhorting, yet this church permitted black leaders to solemnize marriages—a practice that did not directly violate state law, but which did run counter to its general tenor. Such policies served to bolster black deacons' influence in their communities.

Shoulder's Hill passed stricter requirements than Glebe Landing. In 1846, the church ruled that no enslaved member could enter into a marriage without the consent of his or her master; that policy conformed with the letter of Virginia law, which actually had forbidden ministers from uniting slaves without a "certificate" from their owners since 1792.⁷⁹ If members of Shoulder's Hill cohabited as man and wife without obtaining such permission, they would be judged guilty of fornication. The church leaders stated that this ruling would "impress upon the minds" of the black members "the importance of observing strictly, the scriptural duties and obligations of the married state."⁸⁰ Such a measure was clearly intended also to offer church support to a master's control over his slaves' domestic lives. Slave nuptials thus fulfilled opposing roles at Shoulder's Hill as at other churches. On the one hand, the church recognized the significance of black relationships, while on the other, the church deferred to the dominance of the slaveholder. Other churches in the area did not adopt such a rule, demonstrating once again the inconsistencies of Baptist racial policies.

church's approval to marry an unbeliever or an excluded person, for instance. See Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 93.

⁷⁹ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 25, 1846; Acts of the General Assembly, 1792, Chap. 42:16, Samuel Shepherd, ed., *Certain Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, in *The Statutes of at Large of Virginia, from October 1792, to December 1806, inclusive... Vol. I*, (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1835), 134.

⁸⁰ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 25, 1846.

A case at Suffolk Baptist illustrates how some white evangelicals respected the marriages of enslaved people and were willing to bear with them in difficult circumstances. In 1850, Washington and Martha appeared before the church on charges of fornication.⁸¹ They stated that they had been living together as husband and wife for several months, but had only recently made their “marriage” public. The two had apparently “become ardently attached to each other” and “pledged themselves, the one to the other, to live faithfully together as such.” They did not see a need to publicize or solemnize their union, and, in fact, offered “some other reasons for their secrecy,” which the minutes do not report. Perhaps they did not want their master to know of their pledge, lest he forbid it. Suffolk resolved that “they had not been guilty of any moral wrong,” but that they had “acted wrong” in “not conforming to the customs of society.” The church asked them to acknowledge their error and seek forgiveness, which the congregation was willing to grant in order to protect the integrity of the marriage. After they met these conditions, Washington and Martha, still married in the eyes of the congregation, were retained as members of the church.⁸²

Overall, church courts held marriages to be sacred for both whites and blacks, and they had little tolerance for extramarital dalliances. Beulah Baptist excluded bondman Abraham twice, in 1818 and 1821, for adultery and for “improper conduct toward the wife of another man.” As with other offenses, the church extended forgiveness to whites and blacks alike, and Beulah restored Abraham to fellowship after both exclusions. Abraham maintained his good standing in the church and later cited other blacks

⁸¹ The church listed this couple as Washington and Martha “of Riddick,” probably a reference to their master’s name. Other such cases will be cited in footnotes, since the masters’ names are generally irrelevant; although the fact that churches sometimes recorded slaves’ names in this way is in itself significant.

⁸² Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 15 and Oct. 1850.

suspected of adultery; his report on the conduct of bondman Lewis resulted in that man's expulsion in 1833.⁸³ Some congregations even policed behavior that was merely questionable, as enslaved member Will Southall learned. "Injurious" rumors spread in 1848 at Smithfield Baptist that Southall "was in the habit of visiting a certain woman." The congregation promised to continue fellowshiping with him, provided he could "aver his innocence" and discontinue these suspicious "visits." Southall insisted he was without fault and refused to cease calling upon the woman. The church unanimously expelled him. A year later, Southall "presented himself" for restoration. Considering his "due penitence" and "full and satisfactory explanation of his conduct," the church unanimously restored him.⁸⁴ White laymen and leaders faced such charges as well; white deacon Reubin Burch was expelled from Charles City Baptist in 1817 for being "too intermate [sic] with a woman that [was] not his wife."⁸⁵ In Richmond, First Baptist excluded both R.M. Taylor and Mary Ann Breeden after learning of their affair in 1833.⁸⁶

The birth of an illegitimate child in the community, of course, made a woman's sin more obvious than that of her accomplice. Both black and white women were excluded from the churches for giving birth out of wedlock. In 1815, white member Lytha Jasper of Mill Swamp in Isle of Wight County gave birth only six months after marrying, and although she denied any wrongdoing, the church expelled her.⁸⁷ At Four Mile Creek in Henrico County, black leaders zealously punished adulterous liaisons among their own people in the 1840s and 1850s. In the space of thirteen years, free

⁸³ Beulah Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 23, 1818, Aug. 24, 1819, May 27, 1821, Jul. 1822, Sept. 21 and Oct. 27, 1833.

⁸⁴ Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 13, 1848 and Nov. 25, 1849.

⁸⁵ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. and Oct. 1816, Feb. and Mar. 1817.

⁸⁶ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 30, 1833.

⁸⁷ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1812-1840, Mar. 3, 1815, VBHS.

blacks Moses Jonathan and Isaac Sykes brought at least five black women—one enslaved and four free—before the church for fornication, all of whom had allegedly borne illegitimate babies. All were excluded from the church. Within six months, one of them, Sarah Charles, “repented and believed the son [Christ] had forgiven her,” and the church received her back into fellowship. A couple of years later, she was again expelled for having another child. Elizabeth Scott accused free black church leader Allen Adkins of seducing her. He denied the charge, and based on an investigation conducted by three other black leaders, he was acquitted. Free black member Robert James was not so fortunate; he was convicted and expelled for fathering Matilda James’s baby.⁸⁸ Fornication also headed the list of sins alleged against all members at Enon Baptist; the roster there listed numerous black and white women as expelled for “having a bastard child.”⁸⁹

Black and white evangelicals, like the unchurched, sometimes crossed racial lines to engage in illicit sex. Deeming any extramarital sex sinful, the churches prosecuted all types of fornication, whether interracial or not, though at least some white evangelicals seem particularly to have disapproved of such activity. Virginia’s laws against mixed-race marriages had been in place since the seventeenth century, and Baptists appeared unwilling to challenge them.⁹⁰ In 1805, the Dover Baptist Association fielded a query as

⁸⁸ Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 26, 1842, Jan. 26, Feb. 23, Apr. 27, 1850, Jan. 25, 1851, May 22 and Nov. 1853, May 24 and Jun. 22, 1855.

⁸⁹ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, membership roster.

⁹⁰ Laws of Virginia, 1691, Act XVI, in William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the year 1619, Vol. 3* (Philadelphia: Thomas DeSilver, 1823), 87; Laws of Virginia, 1753, Chap. VII:XIV, in *Statutes, Vol. VI*, ed. Hening, 361-62; Acts of the General Assembly, 1792, Chap. 42:17, Samuel Shepherd, ed., *Certain Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, in The Statutes of at Large of Virginia, from October 1792, to December 1806, inclusive... Vol. I* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1835), 134-35; Criminal Code, 1848, Chap. 120: Chap. VIII:4, *Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia Passed at the Session Commencing December 6, 1847, and ending April 5, 1848...* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1848), 111.

to whether a white man and an enslaved woman, who lived together as man and wife, should be received into a church. The Dover delegates responded unequivocally, “by no means.”⁹¹ Several years earlier, “Dunn’s Pegg” had been excluded from Raccoon Swamp “for keeping a white man as husband unlawfully.” Evidently, the marriage dissolved, or the church agreed to reconsider or to look the other way, because Peggy Dunn was eventually welcomed back into the congregation around 1808.⁹²

When South Quay of Nansemond County expelled “Sister Hannah” in 1810 for “having had a white bastard child,” as well as “other instances of loose and disorderly conduct,” the congregation found it worth noting that this enslaved woman had committed miscegenation, even though they would have expelled her for fornication whatever the baby’s race.⁹³ The same was true of Celah, an enslaved woman who was turned out of Upper King and Queen Church in 1833 for giving birth to a “coloured child,” probably referring to a child of mixed race.⁹⁴ Celah was convicted on the report of enslaved deacons Absalom and James. On the other side of the color line, in 1842, white “Brother” Raby of Suffolk, “acknowledged that he did have unlawful intercourse with a col[ore]’d girl.” The congregation expelled him as well.⁹⁵ The church leaders in these instances apparently disapproved of blacks and whites having sex with one another, which is probably why they felt the need to record the race of the illegitimate children. But church leaders cared even more about punishing sex outside of marriage, and they convicted whites and blacks alike for this violation of Christian law.

⁹¹ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association, 1805*, 6, VBHS.

⁹² Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 12, 1794. The church recorded Peggy Dunn’s “case” as “satisfactory” on February 13, 1808 and then granted her a letter of dismissal on November 12, 1814, indicating that she was a member in good standing.

⁹³ Hannah “of Speights” (see footnote 81); South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, 1775-1827, Mar. 3, 1810, VBHS.

⁹⁴ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1833.

⁹⁵ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 2, 1842.

Sexual deviance was not uncommon in church communities, but few parishioners were prepared for the scandal that rocked Suffolk Baptist in 1829. Disturbing rumors had been circulating for some time about William Newborn, a white ordained elder and pastor.⁹⁶ Newborn indignantly insisted that the church did not have enough proof to charge an elder. Indeed, Baptists did not treat an accusation against an elder lightly, and a committee of ordained clergy from neighboring churches was formed to help investigate the matter. Thus began an eight-week trial that would display the church's abhorrence of sexual immorality as well as a respect for blacks in the community.

Five enslaved women, an enslaved man, and a white woman all stood before members of Suffolk and other churches to testify that William Newborn had made obscene advances on local black women. Standing in front of her house with her children one evening, Polly heard a man call to her several times from the road.⁹⁷ When she approached him, she saw he was "a large man, had a drab coat with capes, a wide brim hat, and drove a very large mule to the gig." He asked her "if those children ware [sic] hers." She answered that they were her children and grandchildren, and the man then hinted that one of them must have had a white father. When he asked her "if she could not act the same part again," she refused and stated that "after white men got women of her colour [sic] in that situation they never gave them any to help them out." He assured her that he was a doctor and could prevent her from getting pregnant.

Polly told the man that if he went down the road a bit, she would follow along in a little while. Instead, after he left, she returned to the safety of her house. She later learned that a Baptist preacher was supposed to be traveling to Western Branch Meeting

⁹⁶ Alternately spelled "Newborn," "Newbourn," and "Newbern" in Suffolk Baptist Church minutes.

⁹⁷ Polly "of Watkins" (see footnote 81).

House that day. The church court confirmed that Elder Newborn, in the same clothing and wagon she described, had visited Western Branch on that date. Polly also testified that she had later seen the same man walking to Beaver Dam Meeting House and even heard him preach. Slave Jack corroborated Polly's testimony; he had seen a man of Newborn's "dress and mode of traveling" stop in front of her home that evening.⁹⁸

A slave named Caroline was next to deliver her accusation.⁹⁹ She told the committee that she often brought oysters to Elder Newborn's house. One afternoon, he asked her whether she would return that night to meet him in the back lot. She stayed away, and the following day he asked whether she would walk down to the garden house with him. He offered her money, but she continued to refuse his advances, even when he harassed her several more times after that. Following Caroline's report, another female slave testified that, when Newborn was staying at her master's house, he offered her money and attempted to pull her into bed with him. The clerk discreetly noted, "but really, our pen must be excused here and not be forced to say what it was he wished with [sic] to do."¹⁰⁰

Peggy and Phereby added to the mounting charges against Newborn. While working as an enslaved cook at his house, Peggy stated, she suffered from Newborn's "propositions of an indecorous kind," including his offer to give her a new dress as an "inducement." Apparently, Newborn "referred to ancient times" to justify his sexual "rights" as a master. According to Phereby, Newborn had made similar propositions to her. He asked her whether she wanted a husband, and when she said no, he promised to give her twenty-five cents to "go in the woods with him." White "Sister" Bradshaw of

⁹⁸ Jack "of Ballard" (see footnote 81); Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 30, 1829.

⁹⁹ Caroline "of Wolf" (see footnote 81).

¹⁰⁰ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 30, 1829.

Western Branch Church testified that she had seen Elder Newborn speaking with Phereby for five or ten minutes that day while on the road to the Baptist meeting house.¹⁰¹

Church leaders agreed that Newborn's shameful actions would "destroy his usefulness as a minstor [sic] and his fellowship as a member." Based on explicit testimony from six slaves and one white woman, they voted to expel this elder from the church.¹⁰² Moreover, it seems Newborn could have been convicted solely on black testimony. The white woman was merely corroborating one of the six slave testimonies; furthermore, all she stated was that she had seen Newborn speaking with Phereby on the road, which did not prove Phereby's account of what he actually said.

Shoulder's Hill had been considering Newborn for a position as pastor, but it rejected him based on accounts from Suffolk, even before his exclusion.¹⁰³ When he left Virginia to travel west, his disgrace followed him. Upon his application for membership in a church in Tennessee, that church duly wrote to Suffolk Baptist for information about him. Suffolk replied that, six years earlier, he had been "legally excommunicated from our fellowship, and that he has never been restored, nor petitioned for restoration."¹⁰⁴ With references like that, Newborn would not be able find a fellowship that would welcome him.

Bruington Baptist Church came close to facing a similar scandal in 1832, when Elder John Clarke was accused of "having been to [sic] intimate with a woman of color." The investigating committee reported that "they could find no proof of his guilt," and "he

¹⁰¹ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 30, 1829.

¹⁰² Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 25, 1829.

¹⁰³ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, May 1829.

¹⁰⁴ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 19, 1835.

having solemnly denied the same,” they acquitted him.¹⁰⁵ That same year, however, when white member Thomas Sorrel denied that he had engaged in “licentious conversation” with a “colour’d girl,” Wicomoco Baptist did not believe him. They expelled him both for illicit behavior—“conversation” may actually have meant sexual activity—and for lying about it. The interracial nature of Sorrel’s act may not have lain at the heart of the proceeding against him; the church also cited him for committing the same offense with a white married woman, and while a majority voted to drop this charge, the church “unanimously believed” he had acted inappropriately with the “colour’d girl.”¹⁰⁶

These Baptists evidently viewed white men’s advances on black women as a far more serious offense than did the civil courts. Such cases would never have been brought before secular judges, who officially cared little what a master wanted to do with his slaves—or what white men in general did with slave women. And crucially, no slave could testify against a white defendant in a secular court of law.¹⁰⁷ William Newborn’s case aptly demonstrates the values of some white evangelicals. The fact that an enslaved woman could accuse a white man in high position, that her word would be believed by other white leaders, and that her case would be vindicated by them, was almost unheard of in the antebellum South—outside the evangelical church. Suffolk accepted the testimony of six slaves and allowed these black women to defend their virtue before the

¹⁰⁵ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1831-1868, Aug. 18, 1832, VBHS.

¹⁰⁶ Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 7, 1832. It is assumed that the married woman was white—the clerk did not indicate her race as he did for the “colour’d girl.”

¹⁰⁷ Laws of Virginia, 1732, Chap. VII:VI, in Hening, ed., *Statutes, Vol. 4*, 327; Acts of the General Assembly, 1785, Chap. LXXVII:II, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia...1785* (Richmond: John Dunlap and James Hayes, [1785]), 60; Acts of the General Assembly, 1801, Chap. LXX:4, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred* (Richmond: M. Jones, [1801]), 38; Acts of the General Assembly, 1818, Chap. L:3, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Seventeen* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1818), 66.

church. The members of this congregation saw Newborn's behavior as conduct unbecoming a Christian whatever the race of his victims.

Baptists apparently had no qualms about interfering in domestic disputes; spousal assaults against black and white women also came before church courts. First Baptist of Richmond saw its share of such conflicts. In 1829, black preacher Joe Abraham "frankly confessed with marks of penitence" that he had struck his wife. The congregation retained him in fellowship but forbade him to preach for two weeks.¹⁰⁸ The black deacons of First Baptist presented evidence to exclude Tom Mitchell for whipping his wife in 1830.¹⁰⁹ A few years later, the members of a tempestuous love triangle were banned. The church expelled free black Eliza Sample and slave Elisha Hawkins for an adulterous affair, and slave Harry Sample for whipping Eliza and stabbing her lover. First Baptist must have forgiven Hawkins's faults, because he was elected deacon of the newly formed African Baptist church in 1841 and licensed to preach a few years after that.¹¹⁰

Other congregations judged similar cases. In 1837, Shoulder's Hill Baptist cited a slave named Mingo for treating his wife "extremely ill," by "striking her a severe blow in anger" that "disabled her for several weeks."¹¹¹ At Four Mile Creek, free black leader Benjamin Royster and his wife Susan separated after he "got in a passion" and whipped her. After an investigation by three other free black leaders, the church as a whole voted to exclude him, but brought him back into leadership a few years later.¹¹² George Lee, a

¹⁰⁸ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 23, 1829.

¹⁰⁹ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 23, 1830.

¹¹⁰ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1831-1840, Mar. 10, 1833, VBHS; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930, Oct. 3, 1841 and May 4, 1845, LVA. Hawkins was licensed to preach in May of 1845; see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, p. 217.

¹¹¹ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 16, 1837.

¹¹² Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 24 and May 23, 1852, Aug. 1855.

black deacon at Mattaponi in King and Queen County, was charged with “improper treatment” of his wife in 1845. Instead of expelling him, however, the pastor gave him an admonishment “by the request of the church.”¹¹³

Baptists policed such abuses among whites as well. First Baptist of Richmond excluded Wilson Henly in 1831 for “unchristianlike conduct in fighting his wife,” and also for “refusing to provide her the necessities of life.”¹¹⁴ Isaac Otey made a “confession of sorrow” to the Emmaus congregation in 1841 for having “striped his wife with a switch,” and upon his act of repentance, the church retained him in fellowship.¹¹⁵ When the leaders of Mill Swamp learned in 1849 that George Wiley had been “beating his wife with a rod,” they sent a committee to investigate. The troubled couple appeared before the next meeting, and after “acknowledging their faults and asking forgiveness,” they were excused. A year later, however, both George and his wife, Rebecca, were excluded, he for continuing to beat her and she for “provoking” him.¹¹⁶

Church records repeatedly show the high value that black and white evangelicals placed on familial obligations and domestic peace. Contrary to historian Christine Heyrman’s assertion that, after 1800, church discipline focused more on the public misdeeds of white males, signaling that southern white evangelicals’ “main goal was no longer to dominate the private realm of the household,” the Baptist records of Tidewater Virginia suggest that many congregations continued actively to discipline both private and public transgressions among white and black men and women throughout the

¹¹³ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1854, Jul. 12, 1845. See also Jul. 11, 1841 for Lee’s appointment as a deacon.

¹¹⁴ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 5, 1831.

¹¹⁵ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1841.

¹¹⁶ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1840-1886, Aug. 31 and Nov. 30, 1849, Jan. 4, 1851, VBHS.

antebellum period.¹¹⁷ Free blacks Richard and Latitia, for instance, were both removed from Shoulder's Hill Baptist in 1827 after their marriage fell apart.¹¹⁸ After Latitia left Richard and moved to Philadelphia, he remarried. Black leader Tom informed the church of this act of infidelity.¹¹⁹ In another case, Bill, an enslaved man, came before the white leaders at Shoulder's Hill in 1837 after his wife left him, and after the black leaders of the congregation appeared "unable to manage" his case. Bill stated that he and his wife, a Methodist, had "lived very disagreeably and unhappily for several years," and other members agreed. After no one could say which spouse was more at fault, the church decided to retain Bill in fellowship.¹²⁰ In contrast, William, a slave at Suffolk Baptist, was expelled for "deserting his wife and children" in 1856.¹²¹

Bonds of fellowship and peaceful human relations were important to evangelicals; quarrels and fights between members threatened the unity of a congregation. Both blacks and whites were found guilty of such offenses. Armistead and Daniel, enslaved members of Bruington Baptist, were suspended for two months in 1832 after charging one another with "crimes calculated to bring disgrace on the cause of God" and for displaying "a very unchristian spirit towards each other."¹²² Likewise, Suffolk expelled slaves Jane and Celey for bickering in the early 1850s. Later, when these women asked the church for restoration, several black members presented a "favorable account of their Christian deportment," and they were unanimously welcomed back into fellowship.¹²³ As with other offenses, black leaders often investigated these cases themselves. Richard Sykes

¹¹⁷ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 249-52, quotation on 249.

¹¹⁸ Richard "of Jordan"; Latitia "of Hill" (see footnote 81).

¹¹⁹ Tom "of Cooper" (see footnote 81); Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1827.

¹²⁰ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 16, 1837.

¹²¹ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1855-1907, Apr. 14, 1856, VBHS.

¹²² Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 14, 1832.

¹²³ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 19, 1853.

reported to Four Mile Creek that Daniel Charles seemed “very indifferent” after facing charges of fighting and swearing in 1859.¹²⁴ After Lucy and Botina were cited for quarreling in 1861, Bethlehem Church turned the case over to its black deacons.¹²⁵ Masters sometimes reported to churches about such conflicts among their slaves. In 1833, Littleton Moore of South Quay Church charged “bro. Bob” with engaging in a fight with “another of his negroes.” When Bob acknowledged his fault with “contrition and repentance,” the church “did freely forgive him.”¹²⁶

While Baptist churches seemed to charge their black populations with fighting more often than they did whites, heated disputes did occur between white members as well. When Brother Grimes could not “feel reconciled” with two other white brethren in 1840, Shoulder’s Hill expelled him, and did the same to Lemuel Babb for a conflict with a fellow white man a few years later.¹²⁷ In Southampton County, white member Allen Edwards submitted an indignant letter to Black Creek Church, describing how someone there had slandered his character. When he refused to share the Lord’s Supper (the sacrament of communion) with the alleged offender, the church leaders accused *Edwards* of slander and summarily expelled him. The clerk actually pasted Edwards’s offensive letter on the inside cover of the minute book.¹²⁸ One might assume that such offenses to a person’s “honor”—traditionally understood as the province of southern white men—were only adjudicated between whites, but a case at Suffolk Baptist reveals otherwise. A female slave named Pendar was accused of slandering another black woman in 1859, and

¹²⁴ Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 27 and Oct. 22, 1859.

¹²⁵ Bethlehem Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1875, Jan. 1861, VBHS.

¹²⁶ South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1899, Dec. 1833, VBHS.

¹²⁷ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 21, 1840, Dec. 26, 1843.

¹²⁸ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1818-1862, Jan. 1835, VBHS.

after a conference of black members voted to expel her, the whites agreed and did so.¹²⁹ Churches rarely reported cases of blacks and whites quarreling with one another; but the fact that they challenged combative members of both groups and respected the judgments of black leaders is significant.

Occasionally, congregational disputes went beyond quarrels and accusations, as in the case of John W. Rozarro, a black deacon and preacher at Charles City Baptist.¹³⁰ Along with several other black leaders, Rozarro attended church business meetings, cited disobedient members, and helped keep the church roster up to date.¹³¹ When his marriage failed and his wife Nancy refused to live with him, Charles City sided with Rozarro and excluded Nancy.¹³² Rozarro was apparently an active and valued member of this fellowship. He sometimes attended meetings at James City Baptist, a neighboring church, as well. It was there that a serious conflict ensued in 1817. Apparently, Rozarro had arrived at a preaching service “with a drawn sword in his hand.” When someone tried to take it from him, “he refused to give it up and wounded two young men.”¹³³ James City and Charles City both excluded him. The church records do not indicate why Rozarro might have brought a weapon to the meeting, but he probably had a personal dispute with someone there. This violent incident did not seem to affect local white

¹²⁹ Pendar “of Riddick” (see footnote 81); Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 24, 1859. See also Betram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹³⁰ Rozarro’s name was alternately spelled “Rozarro,” “De Rozaro,” and “Rozarer” in Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book; Charles City Baptist became Emmaus Baptist Church in 1834 (see footnote 1)

¹³¹ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, May 1816.

¹³² Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, May 1813.

¹³³ Letter from James City Baptist Church to the Baptist Church in Charles City, in Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 18, 1817.

Baptists' approval of black deacons, however; men like Samuel Ellison, Jerry Bailey, and Pleasant Smith continued to serve as leaders at Charles City.

Although southern society at large deprived enslaved people of many human rights, slaves did possess important rights in evangelical communities. In 1825, First Baptist saw fit to exclude white member William Muse for a "breach of promise" to a black man.¹³⁴ Muse had apparently assured one of his slaves that he would sell him to a local master. Instead, he broke his word and sold the man to a buyer from New Orleans. Muse did not break any civil law by selling this slave downriver, but First Baptist ruled it to be immoral conduct toward another person. Since the minutes only refer to the slave as "a man," one can guess that he was not a member of the church. That church leaders would go out of their way to defend a slave who did not even belong to their community reveals a remarkable regard for the rights of the enslaved. Of course, they did not see a problem with Muse's owning and selling slaves in the first place, but it is notable that they upheld the binding character of a white man's promise to an enslaved black.

In addition to breaking the peace, slandering others, and lying, white and black Baptists committed a host of other offenses and were disciplined with little apparent regard to race. From attending horse races and playing cards to dancing and fiddling, one might find himself or herself in a church court for indulging in many sorts of amusements.¹³⁵ Of a more serious nature were the crimes of neglecting to attend worship, breaking the Sabbath, and committing theological error. White and black males

¹³⁴ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 19, 1825.

¹³⁵ For examples, see Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1774-1815, Nov. 19, 1791, VBHS; Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1838; Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 18, 1837; Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 30, 1845.

especially faced charges of non-attendance.¹³⁶ Attempting to crack down on a mounting number of absences, Shoulder's Hill ruled in 1838 that if any member failed to attend service at least once a month, he or she would face the church's discipline.¹³⁷ In the early 1840s, free blacks Sam Hilliard and Esais James were both expelled from Elam Baptist in Sussex County for failing to attend church "as a member ought to do."¹³⁸ A committee of black leaders recommended that Glebe Landing expel Linsy Morris in 1850 for his frequent absences.¹³⁹ William Ballentine, a black deacon at Second Baptist Church, was cited in 1844 for keeping his barber shop open on Sundays.¹⁴⁰ When questioned by the church, he admitted the "impropriety of it," but also pointed out that church members were continually visiting his shop on the Sabbath. The church advised him to stop working on Sundays and also exhorted members not to seek his services on that day.¹⁴¹

Elders and deacons sought to root out those who deviated from accepted evangelical theology. In 1832, Edlow Baker, a black deacon at First Baptist, was dismissed from fellowship for "entertaining and propagating false doctrines."¹⁴² Portsmouth Baptist decided to expel black "brother" Thomas Massenbourgs in 1838 after he "affected to have had...strange revelations—apparently unknown to himself or to others."¹⁴³ When white member Wiley Parker started to imbibe "universalist

¹³⁶ First Baptist excluded white member Nathaniel Crow in 1833, for instance, for "disregard to the Lords day and neglect of the ordinances of the church." First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 1833.

¹³⁷ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 29, 1838.

¹³⁸ Elam (Seacock) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1840 and May 1841.

¹³⁹ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 1850.

¹⁴⁰ Alternately spelled "Ballendine" in Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book.

¹⁴¹ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1843-1866, Sept. 26, 1844, VBHS.

¹⁴² First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 5, 1832; see May 15, 1827 for Baker's appointment as a deacon.

¹⁴³ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 9, 1838.

sentiments” at Suffolk in 1834, he was promptly removed from fellowship.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, Mattaponi excluded enslaved member Henry for “denying faith in Christ” in 1852.¹⁴⁵

Those who chose to abandon the Baptist faith and attend services of other denominations were, not surprisingly, excluded as well. At Charles City, David Woodson, a black deacon, and Hannah Howle, a white woman, both forfeited their membership in the 1810s by joining the Methodists.¹⁴⁶ At least two white sisters were excluded from First Baptist of Richmond in 1833 and 1834 for allying with other denominations—one had gone off to the Methodists, the other to the Presbyterians.¹⁴⁷ Certain doctrines even split and dissolved entire congregations. Many whites and some blacks were struck from church rolls, particularly at First Baptist, for embracing the controversial teachings of reformer Alexander Campbell, who opposed the expansion and centralization of Baptist institutions, such as missionary organizations, and who advocated a return to “primitive” Christianity. The Campbellite challenge, more than any other issue, troubled Baptist churches and associations during the 1830s.¹⁴⁸

Any behavior that went against the rules and doctrine of the church threatened the “order” of the congregation. Thus, Baptists often employed the catchall label “disorderly conduct” to charge wayward members. This term could imply to any number of offenses, such as fornication, theft, drunkenness, violence, profanity, disrespecting church authority. Men and women could be excluded for an offense as general as a “disorderly walk” (meaning any number of errors in behavior or doctrine) as William Felts, a white

¹⁴⁴ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 20, 1834.

¹⁴⁵ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 13, 1852.

¹⁴⁶ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 1813 and Oct. 1816.

¹⁴⁷ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 24, 1833 and Nov. 24, 1834.

¹⁴⁸ See minutes of First Baptist Church, Richmond, particularly between 1833 and 1834. For an overview of Campbellism, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 71, 101, 167-68. The Campbellite movement is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

member of Raccoon Swamp, was in 1814.¹⁴⁹ Although both whites and blacks were charged with the somewhat vague transgression of disorderly conduct, Baptist churches were more likely to accuse slaves of such conduct. When a slave ran away or stole from his master, or when he challenged his master's authority, the church might deem him "disorderly." Raccoon Swamp expelled Tom, an enslaved member, for "disorderly conduct toward his overseer" in 1838.¹⁵⁰

Throughout the antebellum period, churches would often appoint free black and slave deacons to supervise the black membership and report "those that at any time walk disorderly."¹⁵¹ Enslaved deacons cited numerous fellow slaves for "supposed disorder" at Upper King and Queen church in the 1830s. The term was apparently popular at this church; many whites were supposedly "in disorder" as well. Sometimes groups of slaves were excluded from a congregation, as when enslaved member Ned reported to Colosse Baptist that several slaves from West Point were acting disorderly in 1859. All of these bondpersons were later restored to fellowship.¹⁵²

Free blacks were also accused of disorder, though less often than slaves. First Baptist sent black deacons to cite Caesar Lewis in 1828 for "disorderly conduct in advising members of this church to act contrary to the rules of the church." Based on their investigation, Lewis was reprimanded but not excluded.¹⁵³ A few years earlier, the church had expelled and then restored Lewis for "improper conduct and language" toward Pamela Lewis, apparently his wife.¹⁵⁴ And again in 1830, Lewis stood before the

¹⁴⁹ Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 12, 1814.

¹⁵⁰ Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 7, 1838.

¹⁵¹ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1809.

¹⁵² Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, 1814-1870, Aug. 1859, VBHS.

¹⁵³ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 1 and 15, 1828.

¹⁵⁴ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 3, 1825.

church court. This time, First Baptist charged Lewis and John Taylor with circulating “certain books”—of what kind the records do not say. After reprimanding Taylor and Lewis, and stripping Taylor of his deaconship, the church did not pursue the case further.¹⁵⁵ The congregation did not appear concerned enough about the black men’s reading habits to exclude them entirely—a notable attitude in a white population that was supposedly alarmed by instances of black literacy.

Charges of disorder against enslaved church members generally had the effect of bolstering masters’ authority. Some evangelical masters may have desired their slaves’ sanctification and wanted them to obey because they believed the scriptures mandated it; others demanded obedience for practical, selfish reasons. And, of course, a master could seek both these goals. While historian Eugene Genovese has argued that slaveholders “came to see Christianity primarily as a means of social control,” he has also admitted that “slaveholders’ motives combined self-interest with a genuine concern for the spiritual welfare of the slaves.”¹⁵⁶ Church leaders were certainly ready to uphold masters’ authority, but many viewed the salvation of slaves as even more important.¹⁵⁷ While considering blacks their spiritual equals, most white Baptists still supported the slave system, and many owned slaves themselves. In the churches of Tidewater Virginia, a great number of slaves were disciplined for running away, stealing from their masters,

¹⁵⁵ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 7, Jan. 28, and Feb. 18, 1830.

¹⁵⁶ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 188-90, quotations on 186 and 189. See also Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 173-77; H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...: Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 129-165; Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism*, 76; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 152-209, especially 208; Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 199-218, 223-25, 254-56; Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 51; John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 6-33, 69-71, 109-10; Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75-79.

¹⁵⁷ Chapter 3, below, explores this question in greater depth.

or other acts of disobedience. Many Baptist churches, such as South Quay, had been prosecuting slave disobedience since the late eighteenth century.¹⁵⁸

Masters occasionally brought their slaves before churches for correction, as in the case of Kittee, who was excluded from North West Church after her master, Matthias Etheridge, accused her of acting “disorderly as a Christian” in 1830.¹⁵⁹ Church leaders might attempt to confer with masters regarding their slaves’ behavior before giving rulings. Albert was expelled from Glebe Landing in 1844 after his master confirmed a charge of theft.¹⁶⁰ Some churches even asked masters to notify them of slaves’ unruliness. In Hanover County, Walnut Grove passed such a resolution in 1850, ordering the clerk to write to all owners of enslaved members and request them to report “any improper conduct of any such servant.”¹⁶¹ Churches also disciplined slaves without any apparent accusation or advice from their masters. When Mill Swamp excluded eight slaves for “disorderly conduct,” the clerk simply wrote to their masters to inform them of the decision; Mill Swamp’s minutes did not record that any of the five masters had initiated this complaint.¹⁶²

One of the main ways that Baptists upheld the authority of slave owners was in prosecuting runaways and those who aided them. As with most issues, the treatment of runaways varied among churches. Ironically, churches sometimes enlisted the support of black members to police runaways. When someone accused Dick of having run away from his master in 1812, Boar Swamp Church appointed “Brother” Frank, an enslaved leader in the church, to talk to him about it. The following month, Dick confessed, and

¹⁵⁸ For one of many examples, see South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 2, 1779.

¹⁵⁹ North West Baptist Church Minute Book, 1800-1841, Dec. 25, 1830, VBHS.

¹⁶⁰ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1844.

¹⁶¹ Walnut Grove Baptist Church Minute Book, 1841-1859, Nov. 30, 1850, VBHS.

¹⁶² Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 2, 1826, VBHS.

the church retained him in fellowship.¹⁶³ Several years later, a slave named Joe was cited by Boar Swamp for the same offense. He “confessed he was rong [sic]” and promised “he would not do the like again.” But since he had already run away several times, the church suspended him for a period, “to see if his futer [sic] conduct [would] comport with his present profession.”¹⁶⁴ In 1833, First Baptist set up a formal committee of white and black leaders to find out the names of those “who have left their owners without leave” so that they could be tried.¹⁶⁵

Second Baptist held a debate over the question of excluding runaway slave Nelson Dabney in 1832. One member proposed that Dabney’s escape be deemed “contrary to the letter & spirit of the Gospel & sinful in the sight of God,” but after some discussion, that resolution was tabled. At the next monthly meeting, an argument ensued, and a vote on the motion was again postponed. Finally, two months after Dabney had been charged, the church ruled that his behavior was “contrary to the Laws of this State.” It appears that some members did not see African slavery as clearly endorsed by God, so they preferred to charge Dabney with violating the civil law instead of the Gospel.¹⁶⁶ Though subtle and by no means favorable to the runaway, this amended ruling typified a worldview that denied the slaveholder’s right to dominate slaves absolutely. For all their support of slavery, white Baptists still asserted that a believing slave’s soul was equal to that of a believing master in the sight of God. And if the master was unredeemed, the Christian slave would hold a place in heaven that his or her owner did not.

¹⁶³ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, May 1812.

¹⁶⁴ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1820.

¹⁶⁵ First Baptist, Richmond, Church Minute Book, Oct. 28, 1833.

¹⁶⁶ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 30, Nov. 15, and Dec. 18, 1832.

When Prince tried to help Martha escape her master in 1854, both slaves were expelled from Suffolk Baptist. Remarkably, however, the church ruled that Martha had absconded “without a just cause.”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, John Newton was denied a letter of dismissal from Walnut Grove after someone reported that he had “threatened the life of Mr. Williams his overseer and moreover ran away without provocation.”¹⁶⁸ One wonders exactly what whites in the church would consider “just cause” or “provocation” for a slave’s escape. Although the records do not answer that question, it is interesting that churches were willing to allow, even in theory, for the possibility that a slave might have justification for leaving his or her master.

Running away was not only considered an offense against one’s master and, in some people’s minds, against God; it could have political overtones as well. In the summer of 1814, several free blacks and slaves were excluded from Wicomoco Church in Northumberland County for leaving their homes and masters to follow the invading British army during the War of 1812. Free blacks William and Rachel “could only be viewed as torys having left their country & people and was strengthening our enemy,” the church clerk wrote, and the church “could not fellowship such conduct.” The enslaved people among those charged “had broken a gospel rule ‘Servants be obedient to your masters,’” and were thus deemed “out of order.”¹⁶⁹ Fifty years later, the flight of slaves and free persons to the Union army during the Civil War would again bring this issue to the fore in Tidewater churches.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Prince “of Holladay” (see footnote 81); Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 16, 1854.

¹⁶⁸ Walnut Grove Baptist Church Minute Book, May 14, 1859.

¹⁶⁹ Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, May, Jun., and Jul. 1814.

¹⁷⁰ The war and postwar periods are studied in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Baptists disciplined slaves not only for escaping, but also for a variety of other transgressions against their owners, including theft. Hamilton, Dauson, and Mary were excluded from Tucker's Swamp in 1848 for "concealing and using a false key" to open their master's meat house.¹⁷¹ As in other types of accusations, a slave could seek the church's forgiveness. Jesse's master brought him before the church for stealing, but after Jesse "expressed his sorrow and manifested a repentant spirit," and promised not to repeat the offense, James City Baptist retained him in fellowship.¹⁷² Church leaders also appeared unwilling to convict a slave without adequate proof. When Bob of Boar Swamp was charged with breaking into a smokehouse in 1806, he denied it, and "no proof being obtained," the church dismissed the case; it did the same for a slave named Davy in 1823 and for another enslaved man, Roger, a year after that.¹⁷³ The charge of theft against Clements of Tucker's Swamp in 1845 "could not be substantiated," and the church agreed to "look on him as a member of our boddy [sic] in full fellowship."¹⁷⁴ While congregations also disciplined whites who broke the eighth commandment by stealing, such as Bartlett Lucas, Betsy Hickman, and John Warden of Richmond's First Baptist, slaves seemed to face these charges more often than free people.¹⁷⁵ As illustrated in the cases just cited, slaves were frequently found guilty of stealing food or livestock from their masters, an infraction often stemming from a lack of provisions, or simply constituting an attempt to benefit from the produce of their own labor. Masters could count on Baptist churches, however, to hold this line in their favor.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 10, 1848.

¹⁷² James City Baptist Church Minute Book, 1857-1882, Aug. 22, 1857, VBHS.

¹⁷³ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 1806, Mar. 1822, Apr., May, Dec. 1823, Sept. 1824.

¹⁷⁴ Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 30, 1845.

¹⁷⁵ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 7, 1827, Feb. 7, 1828, Mar. 10, 1833.

¹⁷⁶ For other examples of slaves facing discipline for theft, see Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 1793 (unidentified), Nov. 1837 (unidentified); Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 6,

The churches sometimes joined secular courts in punishing slave unrest. Only a few cases of violent conduct came before Baptist churches in the area, but the accused were swiftly disciplined. Raccoon Swamp excluded a man named September for allegedly setting fire to his mistress's house in 1851, and Jacob of Colosse Baptist was excluded in 1857 for burning down his master's barn.¹⁷⁷ Only one case of poisoning was found in the region's Baptist records—Mary was expelled from Moore's Swamp in 1832 for "giving poison to the children of Henry Blow for the purpose of trying to destroy them." The church released itself from overseeing Mary's spiritual state, asserting it was no longer "accountable" for her "improper and audacious conduct."¹⁷⁸ Dick, a slave at South Quay, was brought up on several charges in 1830. According to his master, Elias Daughtry, Dick and his wife had stolen bacon, pork, brandy, and cider. When Daughtry tried to search their house, Dick, allegedly came at him with an ax while drunk. Dick argued that had Daughtry "given ought to [his] folks as [he] ought to have done," they

1809 (cotton); South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 3, 1814 (bacon); Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 1819 (geese), Jun. and Jul. 1829 (brandy), Dec. 1830 (unidentified), Jan. 20, 1838 (charges dropped for lack of proof); Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. (sheep), Apr. (hog), May (shirt), Oct. (ducks), 1822; Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 23, 1831 (unidentified); Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 12, 1831 (unidentified), May 11, 1838 (hog), May (unidentified) and Aug. 8, 1863 (tobacco); Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 9, 1836 (unidentified), Dec. 30, 1849 (unidentified); Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 27 and Dec. 25, 1836 (unidentified), May 26, 1839 (corn), Mar. 25, 1848 (corn); Hopeful Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 7 and 29, 1840 (unidentified); Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 27, 1842, Mar. 4, 1843 (money); Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. and May 1843 (unidentified, mistress charges slave in a letter to the church), Nov. and Dec. 1844 (unidentified, church confirms charge with master); Berea Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. and Apr. 1, 1849 (hog), Nov. 1851 (unidentified); Providence Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1850 (unidentified), Sept. and Oct. 1856 (unidentified); Walnut Grove Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 2, 1851 (unidentified), Oct. 12, 1856, Mar. 14, 1858 (unidentified); Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 1855 (unidentified); Bethlehem Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1860 (unidentified).

¹⁷⁷ Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 12, 1851; Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 20, 1858.

¹⁷⁸ Moore's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 23, 1832.

would not have stolen from him. The church unanimously expelled Dick for theft and drunkenness, but for some reason they did not mention assault in their conviction.¹⁷⁹

The only murder case found in church records of the region concerns a slave who insisted he had acted in self-defense. In 1818, “Brother” Jacob confessed to Boar Swamp that he had stabbed a white man, but argued “he did it in vindication of his own life.” Thus, he “did not feel guilty of any sin.” The church investigated the matter, and ruled that Jacob “might have escaped the danger of his life” without killing the man. When they excluded Jacob from their fellowship, several black members walked out of the meeting. The church viewed their protest as “disorder” and sent another slave to cite them.¹⁸⁰ Whether or not the ruling was racially motivated, these black protesters sent a bold message to the rest of the congregation when they refused to fellowship with people whom they perceived as having acted inequitably. Incidentally, since Jacob was present to defend himself before the church, one can conclude that a secular court probably already had acquitted him. Baptist churches usually concurred with court rulings, but in Jacob’s case, it seems they did not. Then too, the church valued an ecclesiastical trial as highly as a secular one. When William Clarke, a free black man, was convicted of theft by the city court of Richmond in the 1830s, First Baptist still appointed its own committee to “inquire into” the case before excluding him.¹⁸¹

Not surprisingly, white evangelicals did not seem nearly as willing to discipline slaveholders for crimes against their slaves as they were to punish the enslaved. Even so,

¹⁷⁹ South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 1830. For an insightful analysis of this case, see Randolph Ferguson Scully, “‘I Come Here Before You Did and I Shall Not Go Away’: Race, Gender, and Evangelical Community on the Eve of the Nat Turner Rebellion,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007), 661-84.

¹⁸⁰ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1818.

¹⁸¹ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 2 and Jul. 27, 1835.

they did attempt to limit masters' cruelty to some degree. In 1796 and again in 1813, someone at the Dover Baptist Association posed the query, "Is there no restriction on believing [i.e., Baptist] masters in the chastisement of their slaves?" Dover passed a somewhat weak, but still significant, ruling on the matter. Admitting that masters sometimes exercised "unreasonable authority over their slaves," they nevertheless thought it "difficult" to "fix a certain rule" for these cases. Instead they left the responsibility to the locally sovereign churches to "take notice of such as they may think improper and deal with the transgressor, as they would with offenders in other crimes."¹⁸²

Only a few cases of masters' injustices appeared before the churches. In 1802, Charles B. Taylor of Mill Swamp accused William Boyce of "uncommon cruelties to his slaves" in keeping "seven or eight clubs under his bed" to beat them. When various members of the church stated that these accusations were false, Boyce was retained in fellowship. Instead, Taylor was excluded for slander.¹⁸³ Years later, Mill Swamp proved markedly lax in protecting blacks. After William Little confessed and apologized for "shooting at a negro" in 1839, he was retained in fellowship.¹⁸⁴ One doubts that a black member would have experienced such an easy trial for shooting at a white man, but at least the church acknowledged Little's behavior as a sin against God and the church.

Baptist practice in Virginia obviously lent support to a master's authority over his slaves. Yet white Baptists' decisions were not entirely motivated by racism or an acceptance of slavery; they did value each slave member as a redeemed believer. A trial at Black Creek Baptist Church mentioned earlier aptly illustrates this mindset. When the

¹⁸² *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association...1796*, 4-5, VBHS; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1813*, 11, VBHS.

¹⁸³ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1791-1811, Mar. 27 and Jun. 4, 1802, VBHS.

¹⁸⁴ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 13, 1839.

church unanimously expelled Allen Edwards in 1835 for writing a “slanderous letter” and refusing to commune with another believer, church leaders did not know what to do about his slaves, who were also members. They decided to ask Edwards whether he had any objections to their continued participation in the Lord’s Supper. Edwards insisted that they not commune with the church if he himself could not. Instead of heeding his wishes, however, the church chose to ask the slaves what they thought and whether “they had anything against the church.” When they said they did not, the church retained them in full fellowship.¹⁸⁵ Black Creek apparently viewed these slaves’ membership, not to mention their prospects for salvation, as separate from those of their master. That belief offered a subtle but powerful challenge to the idea of white superiority.

Although many churches did not permit Afro-Baptists to vote, most did appoint them to serve as leaders over other black members. Sometimes whites formally ordained black men as deacons; at other points, they simply appointed slaves and free blacks to cite members for discipline. These roles entailed considerable power. Even if a black leader could not vote in a church meeting, he could act as an investigator, advisor, advocate, or judge of fellow blacks charged with infractions. He also served as a liaison between black and white members, and could choose to report or overlook offenses at his own discretion. The constitution of Bruington Baptist, adopted in 1815, stated that “some of the most faithful” of the black members should be nominated to “enquire into the standing of the coloured members, and take the proper steps for keeping order love & fear among them.”¹⁸⁶ “Fear” is perhaps best understood as a reference to the non-racial

¹⁸⁵ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 13, 1839.

¹⁸⁶ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, “Rules of the Church,” May 6, 1815.

concept of “fearing” God, though the infrequency of the phrase in church records of the time leaves open the question of whether “fear” may have been an attitude that whites particularly sought among blacks. Enon and Colosse Baptist Churches adopted this same statement in their constitutions in 1820 and 1824, respectively.¹⁸⁷

As black membership soared in churches across the area during the first half of the nineteenth century, and as whites sought to oversee black members, free black and enslaved men were increasingly ordained as deacons. In a sample of eighteen Tidewater churches that documented the appointment of black deacons, about forty-eight black men took office in biracial churches between 1800 and 1840, while about fifty-seven did so between 1840 and 1860, not to mention the dozens of additional deacons who were elected to serve at all-black churches during the antebellum period.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, these figures represent only the number of *recorded* appointments; since church clerks might not have noted each and every diaconal appointment, the actual counts may have been higher. Beulah Baptist even appointed black elders: slaves George, James, Joe, and Ephraim took office in 1833, to “preserve order, give counsel and report disorderly

¹⁸⁷ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, Rules of Government, Number 11, Oct. 1820; Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book. Aug. 21, 1824.

¹⁸⁸ Black deacons took office at these eighteen churches in the following years: Berea—two in 1850, two in 1859; Bethlehem—three in 1860; Bruington—one in 1828, two in 1837, two in 1851; Colosse—two in 1834, one in 1849, one in 1850, one in 1857; Emmaus—approximately fourteen between 1800 and 1825; First Baptist, Richmond—one in 1825, seven in 1827, two in 1828, thirty to serve at First African, Richmond, in 1841; Four Mile Creek—two in 1830, two in 1836, one in 1858; Glebe Landing—one in 1841, one in 1859; Hopeful—one in 1836, one in 1854; Mattaponi—one in 1841, two in 1843, two in 1855; Mount Olivet—five in 1858; North West—one in 1850; Portsmouth—one in 1846, one in 1847, one in 1850; Second Baptist—one in 1826; four in 1842, seven to serve at Second African, Richmond in 1845; Shoulder’s Hill—two in 1814, five in 1854; Taylorsville—two in 1848, two in 1857; Upper King and Queen—three in 1823, one in 1838, two in 1840, two in 1843, two in 1855, two in 1850; Walnut Grove—three in 1842, two in 1844, one in 1849; see church minute books for details. A slave named George (master’s name Redman) was appointed by Wicomoco Baptist in 1814 to cite slaves who had “attempted to go to British.” Thirty years later, a black deacon named George Redman appeared in the records of Fairfield Baptist Church, an offshoot of Wicomoco Baptist Church. Fairfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 9, 1846, Apr. 12, 1851. See Chapter 2 of this dissertation for a discussion of black deacons who served in all-black churches.

conduct” among the black members.¹⁸⁹ This position does not seem very different from the role of black deacon in other congregations, but it is still interesting that this church conferred such a high ecclesiastical title on enslaved leaders.

Not all churches in the area appointed blacks to the diaconate, however; some simply chose black men to serve in supervisory roles, and these black leaders essentially fulfilled the same duties as black deacons in other churches. Throughout the antebellum period, Four Mile Creek, located outside of Richmond, established standing committees to supervise different geographic districts from which the congregation drew.

Committees of free black leaders were also formed. Over twenty-five free blacks attended monthly business meetings with white leaders and oversaw the discipline of the black people in the congregation. Apparently, the church disciplined whites and free blacks on Saturdays and held separate discipline meetings for slaves on Sundays. Churches commonly adopted this practice, since slaves generally were not obligated to work on the Sabbath and therefore could be expected to attend meetings then.¹⁹⁰ Free blacks assisted whites in both categories of meetings at this church, though evidence of black participation in hearings of whites’ offenses is lacking.

Free black men such as William James and Hampton Wardfork regularly cited delinquent black members at Four Mile Creek and reported to the church for more than thirty years, up until the Civil War.¹⁹¹ Some blacks attended meetings even in the months immediately following Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831, despite racial unrest in the

¹⁸⁹ Beulah Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 27, 1833. Upper King and Queen had also appointed black elders Linas and Edom in 1826. Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1826.

¹⁹⁰ Wills discusses how such separate discipline meetings eventually led to separate worship services for black members. Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 53, 64.

¹⁹¹ Also spelled “Woodfork” in Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book.

region.¹⁹² Richard Sykes, a free black man who had served for many years alongside James and Wardfork, led the closing prayer at some of the biracial business meetings in 1860 and 1861.¹⁹³ Like Four Mile Creek, Suffolk Baptist set up a standing committee of black leaders in the 1840s. “Brethren” Robert, Moses, David, Albert Walker, and Anthony Copeland were appointed to report and investigate “any improper conduct that may be in circulation” among black members.¹⁹⁴

Depending on the congregation, black leaders might simply report delinquent members to the white leadership for trial. More often, however, they investigated the cases themselves, and sometimes even handled the exclusions and restorations. First Baptist of Richmond formally delineated the duties of black deacons at a congregational meeting in 1827. Black leaders had been disciplining blacks at this church for years, generally without the involvement of white leaders. Apparently, whites decided to increase their supervision of the black members, and they ruled that the black deacons should report delinquent members to the whole church for a trial. Yet in appointing the black deacons to make “diligent inquires [sic]” into each case, they still left it up to the blacks to decide whether to initiate a given case at all. A month after this ruling, the church counted the votes of both black and white members when appointing six additional black deacons to office. Three of these black deacons, Isham Ellis, John Taylor, and Gilbert Hunt, would later serve as leaders of the First African Baptist Church,

¹⁹² Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book; see membership rosters and minutes, 1825-1861, for attendance lists. In the months after Turner’s Rebellion, York James was present October 1831 and January 1832; Jesse Smith was present October 1831, January, February, April, June, and November 1832; William James was present January and March 1832; Joshua Pleasants was present February 1832.

¹⁹³ Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 27, 1860 and Feb. 25, 1861.

¹⁹⁴ Robert “of Cohoon,” Moses “of Riddick,” David “of Oliver” (see footnote 81); Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 4, 1843.

established in 1841.¹⁹⁵ The black deacons of Second Baptist Church chose new deacons without any votes being cast by white members. In 1842, they informed the church that they had selected four leaders to replace those who had died or moved away, and the whole church accepted their decision.¹⁹⁶

Enslaved and free black Baptists who were excluded often suffered that fate based on the report and recommendation of black leaders. Churches such as Bethlehem Baptist of Hanover County would continually “turn over” cases to the black deacons for investigation.¹⁹⁷ At Bruington in 1838, slave deacons Tom, Daniel, and Isaac investigated the character of William Harrison’s slaves, and recommended that Judy and Silvy be excluded and the others retained. Black deacons initiated investigations of wayward members without the prompting of whites; the offenses ranged from stealing to fornication. At Second Baptist, Lilly Ann Anderson and Henry Morton were both disciplined for “immoral conduct” after a negative report from the “committee of coloured members” in September of 1833.¹⁹⁸ Richard Roane and Richard Green were excluded on the same day, after black members reported that they had stolen, lied, and committed adultery.¹⁹⁹ “Brother” Hercules Blow regularly brought other blacks before Portsmouth Baptist, resulting in the exclusion of men such as Sam Leekin, expelled for drunkenness in 1834.²⁰⁰

In many cases, whites merely gave their “rubber stamp” to a decision already made by the black leaders. When the black members of Mattaponi Baptist expelled

¹⁹⁵ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 20, Apr. 6, Apr. 7, and May 8, 1827; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 3, 1841.

¹⁹⁶ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 22, 1842.

¹⁹⁷ For examples, see Bethlehem Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1860 and Jan. 1861.

¹⁹⁸ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 19, 1833.

¹⁹⁹ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 3, 1843.

²⁰⁰ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 10, 1834.

slaves Daisy, George, and Reubin for “improper conduct,” the clerk recorded the decision as “confirmed by the church.”²⁰¹ At Shoulder’s Hill, blacks expelled Henry Conoway for “using improper language,” along with George Young and July Elliot for adultery, in 1854. White leaders confirmed each of these rulings.²⁰² This practice would continue at these churches, and many others, in the years leading up to the war. Similarly, when Morinda Webb, a black member of Portsmouth Baptist, applied for restoration in 1852 and her penitence was “justified” by the black deacons, she was unanimously restored to fellowship.²⁰³ And when the “coloured committee” at Second Baptist was “satisfied of [the] genuine penitence” of Frances Granford and Maria and George Thomas, the church restored them without protest.²⁰⁴

Black evangelical leaders who were enlisted to supervise the behavior of black congregants, including slave members’ interactions with their masters, served in one sense as agents of white oppression, especially since their authority always existed subordinate to a church’s white leadership. Practically speaking, however, since white leaders would usually confirm the decisions, positive or negative, that they had allowed black leaders to make on their own, these men wielded a significant measure of *de facto* control and saw their authority validated by the black fellow Baptists they supervised.

While whites generally confirmed the rulings of black leaders without hesitation, some disciplinary trials proved more complicated. With the help of other black members, Richard Vaughan pled his case before First Baptist of Richmond in 1835. The church had expelled Vaughan a few years earlier, but the minutes do not indicate why. Vaughan

²⁰¹ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 8, 1851.

²⁰² Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 1854.

²⁰³ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 12, 1852.

²⁰⁴ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 3, 1843.

maintained his innocence and brought before the church “corroborating testimony from the coloured deacons.” The black leaders sought to prove the “error the church had fallen into” in accepting testimony against him and excluding him. After considering Vaughan’s claim, white leader W.E. Crawford moved to rescind the ruling against him, and the church voted unanimously to do so.²⁰⁵ Vaughan, who had been licensed to preach by First Baptist in the 1820s, would later serve as a leader at First African in Richmond. Later still, he would migrate north and accept a pastorship at the First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia in the mid-1840s.²⁰⁶ The black members’ persistent defense of Vaughan’s character at First Baptist, and the white leaders’ acceptance of him, enabled his ministry to flourish for a long time to come.

Other cases did not go as smoothly as Vaughan’s successful appeal. In 1855, a white deacon at Shoulder’s Hill testified that a slave named Henry was guilty of theft. A majority of black members, however, refused to expel him. The white leaders accepted the white deacon’s testimony over the votes of the black members and excluded Henry.²⁰⁷ Despite its notable support of black leadership in other respects, this particular church would not go so far as to deem blacks’ votes equal to the testimony of a white man—telling evidence of how far the white supremacist assumptions of the society at large had infiltrated the thinking of many white Baptists.

Yet sometimes black leaders pushed back, and sometimes whites listened to them. When the black members of Portsmouth Baptist restored Alex Jones to fellowship in 1859, the clerk recorded that this action was “not sanctioned by the church.” A month

²⁰⁵ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 21 and Jun. 2, 1835. See also May 13 and Jul. 11, 1826.

²⁰⁶ See First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Feb. 9 and Apr. 6, 1845 and Aug. 6, 1854. For more on Richard Vaughan, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp. 152, 190, 208, and 222-23.

²⁰⁷ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 1855.

later, however, the congregation's white leaders were apparently won over, because they then voted to restore Jones to membership.²⁰⁸ At times, whites at Shoulder's Hill seemed willing to yield to the arguments of black members. In one case, the white leaders advised the black members to reconsider their (the blacks') recommendation to expel Ely Rix, a free black man. The following month the white leaders conceded the point, however, and removed Rix from fellowship.²⁰⁹

Even as they challenged some rulings by white leaders, blacks also solicited the aid of whites in disciplinary disputes, yielding a measure of cross-racial cooperation. Blacks and whites formed a partnership, though an unequal one, in upholding shared moral standards. When a slave named Mial refused to listen to Boar Swamp's "black brethren," who had charged him with "making too free with another man's wife," the black leaders brought the matter before the entire church. Whites found the evidence against Mial "well grounded," and excluded him from fellowship.²¹⁰ In 1830, Moore's Swamp expelled slave Harvy for showing "contempt" toward black leaders and "refusing to yield to [their] solicitations."²¹¹ In a similar case, Upper King and Queen excluded Suckey for exhibiting a bad temper, swearing, and "not attending to the admonition of the color'd members."²¹²

In September of 1852, Isaac Deans, a free black man, sought the assistance of the white leaders at Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church. Deans had been excluded from the all-black First Baptist Church of Norfolk when that body had attempted to purge its rolls of

²⁰⁸ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1875, Mar. 11 and Apr. 8, 1859, VBHS.

²⁰⁹ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. and Jul. 1849.

²¹⁰ Boar Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1820.

²¹¹ Moore's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 22 and Sept. 11, 1830.

²¹² Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 20, 1838.

“disorderly” members. White pastor Robert Gordon and a group of black deacons led First Baptist of Norfolk, a congregation that enrolled more than six hundred black men and women.²¹³ The church leaders, and probably many voting laypeople, had seen fit to remove Deans from fellowship—yet Shoulder’s Hill in nearby Nansemond County stepped in to defend him. The white leaders there apparently had known Deans, at least by reputation, for a long time. They praised him as a “man of pure integrity, strict honesty, and industrious habits.” Perhaps showing some racial condescension, or at least making a concession to other white people’s prejudice, they remarked that he always manifested “a proper spirit toward his superiors.” The clerk at Shoulder’s Hill noted that Deans always spoke “in the kindest manner of his pastor and brethren” at Norfolk. Deans hoped to be “reinstated in the bosom of the church” and thereafter to emigrate to Liberia. According to the church minutes, Deans’s situation was the only item on the agenda at two “Special Conferences,” indicating the importance the matter held both for Deans and for the white leadership.²¹⁴

The leaders of Shoulder’s Hill recommended that First Baptist restore Deans, who they said was “worthy of...full confidence and christian fellowship.” At the same time, they assured First Baptist that they did not intend to interfere with the “legislative character of the [local] church,” but instead sought to express their “opinion of the individual concerned.”²¹⁵ Thus, Shoulder’s Hill demonstrated respect both for Isaac Deans and for the black leadership of First Baptist. After Shoulder’s Hill pursued the case over the next two months, First Baptist finally agreed to meet with Deans. At that point, Shoulder’s Hill “discharged” the case, perhaps because First Baptist restored

²¹³ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1852*, 16-17, VBHS.

²¹⁴ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1852.

²¹⁵ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1852.

Deans, who eventually left for Liberia with his wife and son.²¹⁶ The willingness of the Shoulder's Hill congregation to intervene on his behalf shows how cordial cross-racial ties among Baptists could sometimes be.

The dynamics of African American leadership in biracial churches varied from that of a “push and pull” with whites to a more segregated autonomy. Whites’ default position seemed to be one of benign neglect, and black deacons thus held considerable authority in their own communities. From time to time, white leaders might attempt to rein in black deacons but then loosen those reins once again, or implement policies and neglect to enforce them categorically. Wicomoco Baptist offers a salient example of the latter pattern. In 1807, the church discussed what should be done about the “evils” arising from the black members’ “manner of discipline.” Whites objected that blacks had been “seting [sic] as a church” to govern wayward members. Such independence was unacceptable to certain whites, and the church ruled that all disciplinary cases should be brought before the entire congregation for a more “public” settlement.²¹⁷ Yet the church continued to appoint blacks to investigate infractions; slave preacher Peter Adams would do so for more than twenty years.²¹⁸ Thus, despite an increase in white supervision, black leaders still exercised power over the discipline of other blacks. In a culture in which accused slaves—and, after 1832, free blacks too—were relegated to city or county courts of oyer and terminer, where white officials presided without juries, Baptists’ appointment

²¹⁶ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1852. Isaac Deans departed Norfolk for Liberia aboard the *Linda Stewart* on November 27, 1852, accompanied by his wife Mary and son John. *The African Repository*, 29 (Jan. 1853), 28.

²¹⁷ Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1807.

²¹⁸ See Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 1807, May 6, 1809, May 11, 1833 and Jan. 1838.

of blacks to investigate brethren of the same race offered a degree of due process unavailable in secular trials.²¹⁹

The most significant challenge both to biracial fellowship and to Afro-Baptist autonomy occurred in the aftermath of Nat Turner's Rebellion in August of 1831. Scholars such as Randolph Scully and Charles Irons have identified Turner's insurrection in Southampton County as a "watershed" in the "racial and cultural dynamics of evangelicalism" in Virginia and beyond.²²⁰ They emphasize how white citizens panicked and lashed out against innocent enslaved and free blacks, threatening their lives and the limited freedoms the latter group had. White Christians, these historians say, viewed black congregants with heightened suspicion and took measures to restrict their religious rights. Although this account rings true in many cases, local church records offer a far more nuanced depiction of interracial exchanges during this period.

While the records of most of the churches in Tidewater Virginia show little or no explicit reaction to the news from Southampton (which does not prove there was none), certain bodies did tighten their oversight of black members in the months immediately following the revolt. At its meeting in 1832, the Portsmouth Association published a letter summarizing the effect of the insurrection on the region's churches, noting that the

²¹⁹ *The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia...1819, Vol. 1* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1819), C-111: 32, pp. 428-29; Acts of the General Assembly, Chap. XXII:11, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Two* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 22.

²²⁰ Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 197-98, 221-32, quotation on 231; Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 140-58. See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 185-90; Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 285-86, 291; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 137-38, 177, 204; Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 33; C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 25; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 325; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 212.

“high character for godliness claimed by many of the insurgents, and the extensive religious influence they actually possessed, (though we believe none of them were Baptists,) have destroyed, with many of our Brethren, all confidence in the professions of that class of persons”—that is, of blacks, especially the many who were slaves.²²¹

Not surprisingly, churches in and around Southampton County treated black members with the most severity. On October 1, a little more than a month after the rebellion, Mill Swamp expelled nine male slaves, six female slaves—all of a single master—and one free black man. Although the records do not indicate why such a large group was removed from membership, one wonders whether they had been accused of seditious behavior in the wake of the insurrection. In addition, the church leaders suspended all black members from communion until its March conference, possibly waiting for the state government to pass its own restrictions on black activities, religious and otherwise.²²² Despite this restriction, only three additional slaves, Billy, Ted, and Bob, suffered exclusion during the year after the revolt for “disorderly conduct.” Additionally, this charge was not always particular to black members and in this instance may not have had anything to do with subversive activity; white member John Hunnicutt was also expelled for “disorderly conduct” at the same meeting that Billy lost his membership.²²³

On March 2, 1832, some seven months after Turner’s revolt, Mill Swamp addressed a query as to whether it was “expedient or right” to allow blacks to hold meetings by themselves either in the daytime or at night. The church leaders decided to

²²¹ “Corresponding Letter,” in *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1832*, 45, VBHS.

²²² Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1, 1831.

²²³ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 2 and Jun. 2, 1832.

forbid both categories of meetings two weeks before the state legislature did so.²²⁴ A couple of months later, the same congregation reported to the Portsmouth Association that its black members “had become exceedingly refractory and ungovernable.”²²⁵ The association advised the church to form a committee to examine and instruct the black members “in relation to Church Government and their duty to their owners.” If blacks refused such instruction, the church should expel them.²²⁶

Mill Swamp heeded the association’s advice and appointed a committee to investigate blacks in the church community. In August of 1832, a year after Nat Turner, the church discussed a significant if somewhat veiled question: whether it was “disorderly” for a member to stay silent when he knew that a crime was being committed. The church answered in the affirmative. This query almost certainly served as a warning to black members who might hear of plans for a slave revolt but failed to report the news to whites. At the same meeting, the church, “after much debate,” voted to retain the blacks in full membership, but required them to remain in a separate section of the church during communion. It seems that the blacks and whites had already been sitting separately for worship—whether on white insistence or by mutual agreement is unclear—but now the white members insisted that black congregants stay seated instead of coming forward to receive the elements. One of the white deacons would have to pass the bread and wine to a black member, who would then distribute it.²²⁷

The majority of whites at Mill Swamp apparently supported this blow to biracial fellowship, but when certain white members pushed for an even more thorough

²²⁴ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 2, 1832.

²²⁵ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1832*, 25, VBHS.

²²⁶ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1832*, 26, VBHS.

²²⁷ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 31, 1832.

separation of the races, the rest of the congregation chastised them. In April of 1833, the church dismissed ten white men for refusing to “fellowship the coloured members”—essentially refusing to attend worship and communion at the same time as the black congregants, and, on a deeper level, refusing to recognize black members as spiritual “brethren” or co-heirs in Christ. Apparently, these men either wanted blacks to worship at a separate time or in a separate building, or to be excluded from membership entirely. The rest of the white members voted to “dissolve” all connection with these white men for a time, choosing to remove them from fellowship rather than dismiss the black members.²²⁸ These ten white men must eventually have agreed to fellowship with the black members, because the church still held blacks in membership after the white men were readmitted.²²⁹

Certain whites in the surrounding community continued to view black religious activity with suspicion and challenged the Mill Swamp congregation for supporting it. In 1835, a grand jury drew up a presentment against the trustees of Mill Swamp for holding an unlawful assembly of slaves, as well as another charge against several members for “interfering with a Patrole company.” Joel Holleman and Nathaniel Young, two political leaders in the Isle of Wight community, offered to use their “best endeavors” to defend the accused, and the case was apparently dismissed.²³⁰ Demonstrating the variety of views of black evangelicalism that emerged after Turner’s rebellion, these politicians joined the white members of Mill Swamp in upholding blacks’ access to Christian fellowship, at some risk to their own reputation among white hardliners in the county.

²²⁸ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 6, 1833.

²²⁹ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 29, 1833.

²³⁰ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1837. This case does not appear in the civil government records, probably because it only went before a grand jury and not to trial; also, the “loose papers” for Isle of Wight County do not extend past 1831.

Yet even in the wake of the Turner revolt, those hardliners were not numerous or influential enough to inflict political damage on Young and Holleman. Young served as clerk of Isle of Wight County in the 1830s, and Holleman held a seat in the Virginia House of Delegates, followed by a term in the Virginia Senate. Holleman was then elected to the United States Congress in 1839.²³¹ At the same time, Mill Swamp maintained its stand on segregated worship. Such conflicting policies were common in local communities and evangelical churches throughout the antebellum period.

A few other churches in the area sought to examine and discipline black members in the wake of Turner's uprising as well. In Sussex County, at least some black members of Raccoon Swamp Church lay under a cloud of suspicion in the autumn of 1831. Five black men were tried and convicted by the county court in September after a young enslaved woman, Beck, testified that she had heard them conspiring in front of the congregation's meeting house three months before the revolt.²³² These men were apparently not members of the church, but nonetheless may have had some kind of ties to it. Raccoon Swamp did expel member William Archer on October 30 after learning that he had been put in jail for involvement in the rebellion. A couple of weeks later, a

²³¹ A man named Nathaniel Young filled the office of clerk of Isle of Wight County between 1800 and 1841, and his son Nathaniel P. Young held the position after him. The Young referenced in the Mill Swamp case was almost certainly one of these two men. John Bennett Boddie, *Seventeenth Century Isle of Wight County: A History of the County of Isle of Wight Virginia*, Vol. 2 (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2007 [orig. pub. Chicago Law Printing Company, 1938]), 702. Holleman served in the House of Delegates 1832-1836 and 1841-1844; the Virginia Senate 1836-1839, and the U.S. Congress 1839-1840 (resigned). He was even appointed Speaker of the House of Delegates in 1842. "Joel Holleman (1799-1844)" in *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> (accessed Jan. 20, 2010).

²³² For a detailed account of Beck's testimony, see Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 37-41.

committee formed at this church to investigate how the black brethren in general had conducted themselves during the time of the “Horrid Insurrection.”²³³

Raccoon Swamp’s leaders even “thought best” to “forbear the Administration of the Lords Supper”—apparently for all members, both black and white—until May, when the Portsmouth Association would meet. Although the church minutes do not indicate whether communion resumed at Raccoon Swamp at that point, the association still wondered at its May meeting whether “union” could ever “be restored between [the] white and coloured members” in the region, or whether the two races would “continue to exercise towards each other no feelings of fraternity or communion.”²³⁴ In light of these words and the fact that Raccoon Swamp seems to have suspended communion for blacks *and* whites, it may be that denying members the elements was less a judgment against blacks than a hesitancy to administer the sacrament amidst such racial tension. Despite whites’ obviously unfair treatment of black members in the wake of the revolt, such a response clearly demonstrates the value these church leaders had traditionally placed on interracial fellowship and their reluctance to challenge black people’s claim to Christian brotherhood.²³⁵

According to its letter to the association, Raccoon Swamp had faced a multitude of problems that year: the pastor was ill and absent, attendance at meetings was low, and the leaders had apparently lost confidence in the “religious feeling” of the black members after the rebellion.²³⁶ Within two years, however, the congregation was boasting to the

²³³ Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 30 and Nov. 12, 1831.

²³⁴ Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 30, 1831; *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1832*, 45.

²³⁵ Biblical teachings emphasize the necessity of reconciliation between believers, particularly in times of worship and communion. Matt. 5:23-24 and 1 Cor. 11:17-34.

²³⁶ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1832*, 14, VBHS.

association of how many black people had been baptized, writing that “Etheopia [sic] is stretching out her hand to God.”²³⁷ The church would continue thereafter baptizing as many blacks as it had before the revolt.

In Southampton County, Black Creek noted a few weeks after the revolt that because of an “unpleasant feeling the white Brethren have toward the Black Brethren,” they would “postpone the sacrament.” Black Creek’s records do not state explicitly whether communion was postponed for both blacks and whites, but, as at Raccoon Swamp, it appears so.²³⁸ In January of 1832, Black Creek held a conference to examine the black members regarding the insurrection. White leader Benjamin Griffin then preached to the blacks who were present, and they were “restored to the privileges of the Church.” In his study of the racial policies of Southampton’s Baptist churches, historian Patrick Breen identifies an eventual “reconciliatory response” to the Turner crisis; and indeed, aside from five members who received letters of dismissal to move to Liberia, every black member of Black Creek was brought back into full fellowship in 1832, and biracial communion resumed.²³⁹

As at Mill Swamp, Moore’s Swamp Church of Surry County suspended only the black membership from taking communion until the Portsmouth Association met in May.²⁴⁰ The church expelled a slave named Moses, who was accused of taking part in the uprising, and appointed a committee to “enquire into the state and standg. of all the

²³⁷ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1834*, 11, VBHS.

²³⁸ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1831.

²³⁹ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan., Mar., Apr., and Sept. 1832; Patrick H. Breen, “Contested Communion: The Limits of White Solidarity in Nat Turner’s Virginia,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007), 693, 703. For an important article to accompany Breen’s, see Scully, “I Come Here Before You,” 661-84.

²⁴⁰ Moore’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 24, 1831.

black members.”²⁴¹ Within ten years, however, Moore’s Swamp would again elect black leaders to supervise black members as it had before the revolt—slaves Harry and James formed a “standing committee to overlook the coloured Brethren and Sisters” in 1842.²⁴² When it came to evaluating the “state and standing” of black congregants, the white leaders of Moore’s Swamp were eventually willing to hand over the reins to black leaders again, simultaneously revealing a renewal of trust in black leadership, a continued attention to black discipline, and an acceptance of racial divisions in fellowship.

White evangelicals in and around Southampton County thus initially reacted to Turner’s rebellion with racial alarmism. They strained bonds of fellowship, and some even barred black Baptists from the Lord’s Table for a time, demonstrating the depth of racist feeling in that time and place. Yet the fact that some churches chose to suspend communion for both blacks and whites seems to indicate a continuing concern for interracial fellowship, as well a general lack of uniformity in Baptist racial policies. Black Baptists weathered this storm, and many returned to these congregations despite the harshness with which they had been treated.

Significantly, most congregations in the Dover and Portsmouth Associations did not even mention the insurrection in their records at all. Recovering their equilibrium fairly quickly, they continued baptizing and disciplining black members as usual. In Richmond, only three days after the rebellion, Second Baptist “heard the religious exercises” of a free black man and two enslaved women and baptized them into

²⁴¹ Moore’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 24, 1832. Tucker’s Swamp of Southampton County appointed a similar committee in January of 1832, Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 7 and Mar. 10, 1832.

²⁴² Moore’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 16, 1842.

membership.²⁴³ A few weeks later, First Baptist, one of the largest churches in the state, received three whites, two free blacks, and seventeen slaves for baptism, and accepted six free blacks and nine slaves two weeks after that.²⁴⁴ In September 1831, at its first meeting following the rebellion, Upper King and Queen Church welcomed sixteen slaves and twenty-two whites for baptism. The clerk made no mention of the recent events in Southampton County.²⁴⁵ Church leaders at Second Baptist of Richmond met in May of 1832 to “hear the exercises of some col[ore]’d friends,” bondpersons Anthony, York, and Betsy, who sought membership. The church willingly accepted and baptized these “friends.”²⁴⁶ Between September and November of 1832, twenty-six whites and forty-six blacks presented themselves for baptism at Shoulder’s Hill Church.

Without minimizing the discrimination with which white Baptists reacted to black brethren after the rebellion, it is noteworthy that most black Baptists maintained their relationship with their churches. Black men and women continued to receive the “right hand of fellowship” along with whites, and black deacons continued to serve in increasingly autonomous Afro-Baptist communities. And, as Breen demonstrates, even near the epicenter of the violent crisis, many white men and women came fairly quickly to support the reintegration of churches and communion tables. Willing to lose other white members in the process, these people “refused to allow white solidarity to trump all other considerations,” as Breen puts it.²⁴⁷ Separation of black and white evangelicals did increase, and new restrictions on black religious activity took effect after Turner’s revolt, but biracial church membership and opportunities for black leadership continued.

²⁴³ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 25, 1831.

²⁴⁴ First Baptist Church, Richmond, September 18, Oct. 2, 1831.

²⁴⁵ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1831.

²⁴⁶ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 21, 1832.

²⁴⁷ Breen, “Contested Communion,” 702.

While the Virginia legislature voted to prohibit black preaching in March of 1832, evangelical bodies had sought to regulate the practice long before the Turner crisis—but often for reasons other than fear of slave revolts.²⁴⁸ Baptist churches did not require formal schooling in theology to preach, but they did thoroughly examine each candidate, black or white. Some church leaders tended to view black candidates warily, uncertain of their preparedness and of the doctrine they embraced, and sometimes fearful of their influence over other Afro-Christians. Numerous black preachers were disciplined for preaching without the permission of a church in the early nineteenth century.

In 1810, the Portsmouth Association cautioned its churches against Arthur Byrd, a “man of colour” who had been “excluded from the Baptist society” and was “imposing on the churches as a Baptist preacher.”²⁴⁹ When Beulah Baptist restored slave member Phil in 1824, they warned him that he was “not to preach again without permission from the Church.”²⁵⁰ In 1823, after discovering that “Brother” York had been “exercising as a preacher, without the permission and contrary to the rules of this Church,” South Quay admonished him “not to exercise in public until the church shall have an opportunity of being better informed of his call—his talents and his moral character.” A few years later, York was again caught preaching without permission, and someone stated that he had attempted to preach while intoxicated. The congregation was “greatly disgusted with his

²⁴⁸ Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:2, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...*, 20-22.

²⁴⁹ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1810*, 5, VBHS. Mechal Sobel identifies some black men—mostly in earlier periods or in other regions or states—who even preached to mixed-race audiences. In Virginia, Jacob Bishop served as pastor of the biracial Portsmouth Baptist Church from about 1795 to 1802. William Lemon was pastor of a biracial church in Gloucester County between 1797 and 1801. “Uncle Jack” of Nottaway County was apparently preaching to mixed audiences until 1832, when “he accepted the closing of his church”; Sobel does not say who closed the church. Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 192-96. The extraordinary ministry of black preacher John Jasper is discussed in Chapter 2, p. 218, and in the conclusion of this dissertation.

²⁵⁰ Beulah Baptist Church Minute Book, May 23, 1824.

conduct and conversation,” and York confessed the violation. The members retained him in fellowship but again forbade him to preach. Apparently, the church’s concerns in York’s case were more theological than racial; they licensed another black man, “Brother” Davy, to preach on the same day that they first disciplined York.²⁵¹

Baptist churches licensed many black religious leaders in the early nineteenth century. In order to promote “religious exercises & preservation of order among the black members,” Upper King and Queen encouraged slaves Will and Major to “exercise their ministerial gifts” on a trial basis in 1806. The church also appointed slave Harry to assist them in “preserving order.”²⁵² Only two years before, the state legislature had forbidden black evangelicals from assembling at night and had directed patrollers to break up such meetings. Perhaps Upper King and Queen wanted to increase its supervision of black Christians in order to avoid the involvement of the civil authorities. But they licensed black leaders to do the supervising and thus fostered a measure of autonomous worship among the black congregants. After considering the “good character” of enslaved member Peter Adams, Wicomoco Baptist encouraged him “to go on in the good cause of God,” tendering him in 1807 “the liberty of holding meetings at any time.” The church permitted him to “exhort from any text of scripture,” but not to preach or “advance doctrines” at these meetings. Though limited, Adams’s leadership role at Wicomoco was significant. Even though the state had prohibited blacks from

²⁵¹ York “of Saunders” and Davy “of Norfleet” (see footnote 81); South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 30, 1822, Mar. 1, 1823, Dec. 25, 1827, Feb. 3, 1828.

²⁵² Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 16, 1806.

assembling after sunset, this church commissioned a slave to lead other blacks in religious worship “at any time.”²⁵³

In the late 1820s, white Virginia Baptists significantly expanded their oversight of black preaching. Concerned that criticism had been “cast upon the Baptist cause” because of their failure to regulate black preachers, Bruington Church solicited the advice of the Dover Association.²⁵⁴ Bruington’s leaders had apparently observed “disorder at funerals carried on by coloured People”; they also thought that many black preachers were of “suspicious moral character” and did not possess “any kind of capacity to impart instruction.” The church alleged that some black preachers had been conducting meetings during which “vicious characters” sold liquor, got drunk, and fought with one another.²⁵⁵ In response to the Bruington congregation’s query, the Dover Association “advise[d]” that churches “make strict inquiry” into the “gifts and character” of all black candidates for the ministry. If someone wished to exercise a gift, he should apply to the “coloured elders,” who would then ask the candidate to speak before them. If the black leaders approved the candidate’s preaching, they would present him to the white leadership, who would conduct a further investigation. Without obtaining a license, no one should “go farther than to sing and pray in public.” The association also advised that churches forbid attendants to bring “spirituous liquors” to meetings.²⁵⁶ Bruington adopted the association’s recommendations and read them to the black members. These

²⁵³ Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 1807. Acts of the General Assembly, 1804, Chap. CXIX:1, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly, Begun and Held at the Capitol... One Thousand Eight Hundred and Three* (Richmond: Meriwether Jones, [1804]), 89.

²⁵⁴ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1826*, 9-10, VBHS.

²⁵⁵ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 5, Sept. 2, Sept. 30, Nov. 3, 1826; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1826*, 9-10, VBHS.

²⁵⁶ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1826*, 9-10.

restrictions were not applied in a draconian manner, however; a month later, seven slaves were in fact licensed to preach.²⁵⁷

With considerable numbers of free and enslaved blacks in their membership, First and Second Baptist Churches in Richmond authorized many black men to serve as spiritual leaders. Additionally, some black men preached without permission. In an attempt to keep better track of its preachers, First Baptist in 1826 appointed a committee to “ascertain the number and names of the coloured brethren permitted to speak in pulpit.” The committee listed five black men who had been authorized to preach and seven who served as exhorters.²⁵⁸ That same year Second Baptist allowed “brother” Nelson, a slave, to invite blacks from First Baptist to “unite with him in prayer meeting” once a month. Nelson had recently taken the offices of sexton and deacon at the church as well.²⁵⁹ Second Baptist also licensed “brother” George to publicly “exercise his gifts” a couple of years later.²⁶⁰ Likewise, Upper King and Queen continued to license black preachers; slaves Billy, Absalom, Henry, and John were among those of both races permitted to “exercise their gifts” in preaching and exhorting in 1827.²⁶¹

Over the next few years, First Baptist continually struggled to determine “who or how many have been authorized” to preach. The church leaders’ difficulty in producing a clear list of licensed preachers evinces a certain looseness and disorganization in their supervision of black members. In 1829, in an attempt to correct this oversight, all black

²⁵⁷ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 3, Mar. 3, Mar. 4, 1827.

²⁵⁸ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 11, 1826. Ned Cary, Joe Abraham, Bartlett Lewis, Owen Dickerson, and Samuel Clear were permitted to preach, and George Montague, Richard Vaughan, Martin Jenkins, Robert Dandridge, Thomas Johnson, John Craig and Ceasar [sic] Hawkins were permitted to exhort.

²⁵⁹ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 16 and Oct. 19, 1826. This man was probably the same Nelson, slave of James Boshier, who was excluded for running away in 1832 (see page 64, above).

²⁶⁰ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 20, 1828.

²⁶¹ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, May 1827.

preachers at First Baptist were required to apply for new licenses and undergo a reexamination by the pastor and deacons. Through that process, John Craig and William Reynolds, who were probably free men, obtained licenses to exhort, and six months later, two others, John Anderson and James Smith, were permitted to “hold meetings for public worship.”²⁶² As the membership of these churches grew, white leaders sought to reform their supervision of those African Americans who exercised leadership. While all candidates for preaching, black and white, had to prove their gifts and character before receiving a license, black men faced additional scrutiny.²⁶³ This often happened for reasons other than concern about sedition and revolt, though it is sometimes difficult to distinguish theological concerns from worries about security or from simple racial prejudice on the part of white evangelical leaders.

Even some actions that at first glance appear to be responses to Nat Turner may have had much deeper roots. A few weeks after the revolt, for example, First Baptist expressed “considerable difficulty” in disciplining black members “because of the laws of the Commonwealth.”²⁶⁴ Since First Baptist was experiencing this “difficulty” even before the state legislature responded to the uprising, their comments probably referred to older state laws, such as that of 1804, which had prohibited blacks from meeting at night, or one adopted in 1831, which forbade free blacks and slaves to assemble for instruction

²⁶² First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 9, Jul. 23, Oct. 3, 1829, Mar. 6, 1830. The church minutes do not indicate whether Craig, Reynolds, Anderson and Smith were free, but it seems likely.

²⁶³ A church leader, “Brother Glenn,” apparently white, of First Baptist, Richmond, for instance, had to prove his “gifts” before an examining committee in order to receive his preaching license in August 1826, one month after the church licensed five black men to preach, First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 5, 1826. Although Glenn’s first name and race is not specified, a “Brother Glenn” is frequently listed among the white church leaders present at each meeting during this period. For another example of a white man seeking permission to preach, see the request of Henry F. Cundiff to “exercise his gifts,” which was granted by Fairfields Baptist Church on Nov. 10, 1850.

²⁶⁴ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 15, 1831.

in literacy.²⁶⁵ Perhaps white church leaders feared that, in the wake of the insurrection, patrollers would enforce these older laws by disbanding black Baptist disciplinary meetings; perhaps, too, they were concerned that the legislature would seek to disempower black deacons altogether. As it was, First Baptist saw an “impossibility from the nature of the [pre-Nat Turner] laws of the land for our coloured brethren to exercise public gifts.” Perhaps anticipating the state’s passage of even stricter laws at its upcoming session that March, church leaders at First Baptist revoked the licenses of all black preachers in the congregation.²⁶⁶ African Americans such as William Reynolds, who had been permitted to exhort only two years earlier, had to give up their certificates.²⁶⁷

Although the church stripped blacks of their right to preach, it still nominated them for certain roles that involved leadership. William Reynolds, along with four other black men, was appointed to oversee the discipline of the black members on April 7, 1832, one month after the state legislature passed its restrictions on black religious activity.²⁶⁸ Turner’s revolt thus left a mixed legacy for black Baptist leaders: heightened supervision sometimes actually translated into other opportunities to exert leadership and autonomy within the black Baptist community.

²⁶⁵ Acts of the General Assembly, 1804, Chap. CXIX:1, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly.*; Acts of the General Assembly, 1831, Chap. XXXIX:4-6, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1831), 107-08.

²⁶⁶ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 15, 1831.

²⁶⁷ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 23, 1829, Sept. 15, 1831. A “Brother Cowles” was also prohibited from preaching on September 15, at the same meeting as Reynolds and the other blacks. The church ruled that it was “inexpedient” to grant Cowles a license and instructed him to “desist from appointing meetings and preaching.” This man was probably black member Abraham Cowles, excluded Dec. 15, 1835 for adultery, although the membership also included a white leader with the surname Cowles.

²⁶⁸ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book. Apr. 7, 1832.

Most Baptist churches did not pass formal rulings on black preaching following Turner's revolt; rather, they simply stopped licensing blacks after 1832.²⁶⁹ A few churches, however, did explicitly forbid blacks from exercising their gifts. After licensing seven slaves only a few months earlier, Bruington suspended preaching rights for all black members on October 1, one month after the insurrection. Licenses would be withheld "untill [sic] such time as the church may think proper."²⁷⁰ The church passed this ruling long before state representatives voted to prohibit blacks from preaching and exhorting. Like First Baptist, which had adopted a similar measure on September 15, Bruington probably anticipated that the state would soon outlaw black preaching entirely.²⁷¹ Whether Bruington's leaders believed that black preachers were a danger to

²⁶⁹ At some point in the early 1830s, Upper King and Queen removed its rule regarding black preachers from its constitution, indicating that blacks could no longer apply for licenses. See list of church rules, Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 18, 1836. See Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism*, 93-101, for a study of the different types of black preachers—ministers, exhorters, self-appointed preachers, and "cult leaders." In addition to those preachers who sought authorization from their local churches (the focus of this dissertation) enslaved preachers also spoke to more informal gatherings on plantations and farms. One slave narrative relates how Pleasant Randall, a slave in Charles City County, was arrested for preaching after Turner's Rebellion. According to the narrative, which does not identify Randall's denomination, Randall's master defended him and brought him before the governor for a pardon. Upon hearing Randall preach, the governor not only pardoned but freed him as well. Although this account seems exaggerated, it serves as a reminder that black preaching often occurred in informal settings outside the supervision of constituted churches, in what has become known as the "invisible church." E[lizabeth] M[erwin] W[ickham], *A Lost Family Found: An Authentic Narrative of Cyrus Branch and His Family, Alias John White* (Manchester, VT, 1869), 19-21, available online at Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter DocSouth), added 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/wickham/wickham.html> (accessed Aug. 16, 2012). The famed Henry "Box" Brown of Richmond, who escaped from slavery in 1849 by mailing himself in a box to the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, related the story of a Richmond black preacher of an unidentified denomination whose calling was "too deeply rooted for him to be silenced by any mere power of men"; this man "refused to obey the impious mandate" and was "severely whipped." Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written By Himself* (Manchester, Lee and Glynn, 1851), 19-20, available online at DocSouth, added 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html> (accessed Sept. 14, 2012). See also Charles Stearns, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown...* (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849), 38, available online at DocSouth, added 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html> (accessed Sept. 14, 2012), and Suzette Spencer, "Henry Box Brown (1815 or 1816–after February 26, 1889)," *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Jan. 12, 2012), in *Encyclopedia Virginia*: http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Brown_Henry_Box_ca_1815 (accessed Sept. 14, 2012).

²⁷⁰ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1, 1831.

²⁷¹ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 15, 1831.

society, or whether they merely wanted to avoid antagonizing other whites in the neighborhood in the weeks after the rebellion, remains uncertain. The state did move to prohibit blacks from preaching in March, and the records do not indicate that the Bruington congregation ever rescinded the ruling of October 1.

First Baptist seemed to disagree with the state's view of black religious leaders. When former preacher William Reynolds applied for letters of dismission for himself, his wife Sarah, and daughter Minerva in 1835, the church provided them, along with a "certificate, respecting his license to preach the gospel." The congregation's white leaders specifically directed the clerk to explain on Reynolds's certificate that his license had been "withdrawn in consequence of the laws of the state."²⁷² If Reynolds decided to move to a state that allowed blacks to preach, he could present this certificate to a Baptist church there and perhaps receive a new license. Effectively, the document asserted that he had left the church as a preacher in good standing, and First Baptist made a point of helping him prove that.²⁷³

Despite the restrictive legislation of 1832, African Americans continued to play significant roles in public ministry throughout the antebellum period. Many blacks served as deacons, as discussed above, and some even spoke before religious assemblies. In 1846, when the black members of Portsmouth requested that the church appoint "Brother" Castello Deans to the diaconate in order "to officiate for the coloured members

²⁷² First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 30, 1835.

²⁷³ For an even more explicit case of white evangelicals showing sympathy for black preachers, see Reginald F. Hildebrand, "'An Imperious Sense of Duty': Documents Illustrating an Episode in the Methodist Reaction to the Nat Turner Revolt," *Methodist History* 19 (Apr. 1981), 155-74. Hildebrand's important and under-appreciated document study reveals how seven white Methodists in the Norfolk area remarkably put forth an "impassioned, eloquent, and straightforward egalitarian" defense of the rights of black preachers after Nat Turner's Rebellion, fighting the Methodist Church's refusal to renew enslaved preachers' licenses "until they had exhausted every level of appeal." Hildebrand, "Imperious Sense of Duty," 155.

of the church,” the leadership granted the motion.²⁷⁴ The church’s definition of “officiate” is unclear, but perhaps Deans was permitted to administer communion or even speak publicly to the black members. Regardless, the white leaders honored the request of their black brethren and placed Deans in a respected clerical role. Some churches explicitly forbade blacks from administering the Lord’s Supper, and Glebe Landing charged slaves Griffin and Jack with having done so. After hearing their defense, however, the church leaders determined that their aim “was only to advance the cause of God,” and excused them, provided they promised to “do so no more.”²⁷⁵ Once again, whites demonstrated a dualistic view of black evangelical leaders: while they acknowledged and appreciated Griffin and Jack’s efforts to “advance the cause of God,” they insisted that blacks remain under white supervision.

Black Baptists sometimes held religious ceremonies outside the purview of whites. In 1853, Shoulder’s Hill learned that black members “were in the habit of holding meetings in the night for the purpose of washing each other’s feet.” The church “expressed her disapproval” and advised them to cease the practice.²⁷⁶ Evidently, the black members did not heed this advice, because two years later a white deacon reported that the “colored church”—a semiautonomous branch of the congregation which had been meeting separately since at least the 1830s—had been “practicing feet washing [by certain members for their fellow worshipers] for some time.” The black members “wished to obtain the consent of the church for the practice.” The church leadership

²⁷⁴ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 10, 1846.

²⁷⁵ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1841.

²⁷⁶ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1853.

refused, stating that “feet washing is not commanded in the New Testament,” and thus was “not binding on the church.”²⁷⁷

In the citation of 1853, it seemed that white members were objecting to the meetings because they occurred at night; either the whites were in agreement with the law that banned nocturnal assemblies, or they were concerned that the black brethren would be arrested or assaulted by patrols. Yet in 1855, the dispute appears to have been purely theological—“feet washing is not commanded in the New Testament”—an argument arising from differing interpretations of scripture rather than from whites’ fears of black religious autonomy per se. In any event, these black Baptists had continued the ceremonies despite white leaders’ opposition in 1853; one wonders whether they still did so after whites denied them permission a second time. Given the mildness of the white leaders’ original response to this foot-washing issue—they “advised” rather than commanded, and they let the practice continue for at least two years without censure—the white members seem to have been willing to allow “the colored church” a significant amount of independence.

Although the state laws effectively silenced many black preachers, some continued to speak publicly, often with the full knowledge of their local churches and surrounding neighborhoods. In discussing the meetings of its black members in 1859, Colosse required that two whites should superintend each meeting and exposit scripture for those attending. Yet the resolution also stated that the white leaders should then “call on any of the colored members to pray, exhort, or sing.”²⁷⁸ According to the laws of the

²⁷⁷ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 1855; see also Julian S. Lawrence, “Historical Review of Churchland [formerly Shoulder’s Hill] Baptist Church,” in *An Historical Review* (Chesapeake, VA: Norfolk County Historical Society, 1966), 46.

²⁷⁸ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1859.

state, blacks were not permitted to preach *or* exhort at any time. But this church clearly followed its own principles when it came to governing black religious activity.

A discipline case at Enon Baptist provides further evidence that blacks were engaged in public ministry. In 1854, Frank Key, a free black member, appeared before the church on charges of “intemperance and other incriminalities [sic].” After investigating, the church “suspended him from full fellowship and prohibited him from preaching exhorting or praying in public.” They also “denied him the privilege of partaking of the Lords Supper” until the church “might be convinced of his repentance and good conduct.” Apparently it was mainly Key’s intoxication, and not his preaching, that got him into trouble with the church. Thus denial of the right to preach—a common punishment for blacks and whites alike—may merely have been the penalty for Key’s real offense rather than a reinforcement of the secular law that prohibited blacks from preaching. The minutes suggest that Key already had been engaging in public ministry with the church’s full knowledge for some time. Five months later, the church welcomed him back into fellowship, but the records do not indicate whether he resumed preaching.²⁷⁹ The church likely kept a closer watch on Key’s ministry, but the clerk did not make note of any further disagreements with him.

When Shoulder’s Hill learned that certain “colored persons” were “in the habit of coming from Norfolk to preach to [the] colored members” in August 1860, the members discussed the “propriety of allowing” them to “continue to do so” and then voted to “prohibit such persons from preaching to our people.”²⁸⁰ Based on the wording of this record—these black men had made a “habit” of preaching, and white members discussed

²⁷⁹ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, May, Jun., and Nov. 1854.

²⁸⁰ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1860.

whether they should “continue” the practice—it is fairly clear that some time had passed before anyone thought to restrict them. One wonders why patrollers had not stepped in to enforce the ban on black preaching, or why the church did not solicit the aid of lawmen in silencing the preachers. Shoulder’s Hill may have been more concerned that these preachers lacked the ordination of a Baptist church than that they were breaking the secular law. White Baptists would grant a significant degree of autonomy to black members, but they still wanted blacks (and whites) to listen exclusively to the teaching of authorized preachers.

In general, the religious lives of blacks and whites became increasingly separate in the nineteenth century. Black Baptists probably reacted with mixed emotions, lamenting the erosion of fellowship and the inequitable treatment, yet welcoming the independence and opportunities found in black assemblies. At biracial churches, white leaders often forced black members to sit in separate sections, or even held separate services for them. No doubt blacks sometimes separated voluntarily as well. An early example of segregation, Wicomoco expanded its meeting house in the 1810s, including a “partition to divide the whites and blacks.” When this division created “distress” among some of the black members, whites discussed the matter and still voted to construct the barrier. Three black members continued to express their dissatisfaction with the church’s decision, and the church came up with a compromise. The black membership seemed satisfied when the church leaders agreed to cut a “pass way” through the partition.²⁸¹ Several months later, however, free black member Spencer Thomas “still refused to come into that part of the meeting house assigned to the blacks.” The church reminded him

²⁸¹ Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1812.

that it had “complied with the terms of conciliation” by cutting the “pass way,” but Thomas refused to agree to such treatment, and the church excluded him as “disorderly.”²⁸² This case clearly illustrates the complexity of the biracial church; the whites respected the black members enough to offer a compromise, but not enough to sit with them. Thomas understood and rejected what would become standard in biracial congregations: an unequal fellowship that incorporated both a degree of accommodation to black sensibilities and repression of black rights.

Churches with substantial African American populations, such as First Baptist in Richmond, also tended to segregate relatively early. In 1833, First Baptist recorded some construction of a fence “from the south east end of the house to the gate opposite the south door of the coloured peoples part of the church,” indicating that blacks and whites had been sitting separately for some time. The fence itself may have been designed to separate the races more thoroughly, although the black people’s “part of the house” simply may have been cited as a landmark, as the fence was being erected outdoors.²⁸³ A year earlier, Second Baptist had voted to set up a railing in the church gallery “so as to separate our col[ore]d Bre[thre]n from the singing choir.”²⁸⁴ In a double-edged gesture of goodwill, Four Mile Creek took up offerings from the congregation to help maintain the black people’s portion of the church. In the winter of 1839, the church raised enough money to buy a stove for the “coloured part” of the “church & congregation,” and in 1843, it hired a member to build benches for the “colored persons apartment.”²⁸⁵

²⁸² Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 24 and Jun. 1813.

²⁸³ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 4, 1833.

²⁸⁴ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 15 and Mar. 24, 1832.

²⁸⁵ Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 28, 1839 and Aug. 26, 1843.

Seating arrangements varied considerably among congregations. While a small number of churches formally separated whites and blacks early in the century, others did not establish explicit seating rules until the 1840s and 1850s.²⁸⁶ Of course, those rules may merely have ratified what was already being practiced informally. As congregations expanded in size and constructed new buildings, which many did in this period, white members may well have used the occasion to codify racially separate seating arrangements.²⁸⁷ At a church meeting in 1845, the members of Upper King and Queen had “a good deal of conversation about giving more room to the color’d people.” With the “sanction of the Ladies present,” the voting members—presumably white men—decided to “give” the gallery and the seats in the back of the church to the black members. The minutes then reveal that blacks and whites had actually been sitting separately for some time: the church appointed someone to take the “separating Bars” away from the part of the church where the blacks had formerly sat and move the barrier to the newly designated area.²⁸⁸ The clerk’s mention of the “sanction of the Ladies” suggests a gendered aspect to the racial segregation as well: these white members likely wanted to keep blacks, particularly black men, from coming into contact with white women.

²⁸⁶ For other examples of how churches separated blacks and whites, see Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 8, 1839; Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 19, 1841, Oct. 18, 1845, and Jun. 17, 1848; North West Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 6, 1844; Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, May 13, 1848; Fairfields Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 10, 1850; Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 4, 1851; Hopeful Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 9, 1858; Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 11, 1859; Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 1859.

²⁸⁷ Beth Barton Schweiger links white Christians’ increasing desires for social “respectability”—shown in the construction of expensive brick meeting houses in the 1840s and 1850s—with their “growing estrangement” from black members in biracial churches. Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 44, 51.

²⁸⁸ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 18, 1845.

Black Baptists indeed moved farther away from whites in the late antebellum period, both physically and socially. Many white evangelicals encouraged this process, even if it meant that blacks might move farther away from their scrutiny as well. Changes at Shoulder's Hill demonstrate the growing divide between white and black evangelicals, as well as the autonomy blacks could glean from that separation. When preparing for their annual four-day revival in the summer of 1832, the church voted to "prepare a place for the colored people to worship."²⁸⁹ In 1844, the church instructed the black members to "prepare a bush arbor at a convenient distance from our House of worship for the purpose of worshipping under during our meeting."²⁹⁰ It appears that black members were already gathering separately, both on Sunday mornings during the service and on Sunday evenings for prayer meetings; the church had been appointing white deacons to oversee the evening prayer services since the 1830s.²⁹¹ In 1847, someone in the community objected that these meetings violated the state laws, which prohibited slaves from meeting at night—even when led by whites—without permission from their masters. In response, the church formed a committee to obtain "the feelings of the neighborhood" about the meetings. They agreed that if a majority of people—presumably white—in the community opposed the meetings, the church would "suspend" them. But if not, the church would continue the practice.²⁹²

The white members of Shoulder's Hill obviously considered the state's racial code a hindrance to their religious activities, and they were willing to ignore significant

²⁸⁹ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 11, 1832.

²⁹⁰ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 1844. See Chapter 3 of this dissertation, p. 260, for further discussion of the "bush arbor."

²⁹¹ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, May 16, 1835 and Jul. 1836.

²⁹² Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1847; Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:2, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...*, 20.

parts of it if their neighbors did not protest; for these white Baptists, community sentiment outweighed the law. A year after this controversy, the church granted the black members the “privilege” of building a shed on the land of Rice Carney, one of the white deacons, “for the purpose of worship in time of protracted meetings.” The church leaders even hired a lawyer to research the legality of such a measure.²⁹³ Evidently, the lawyer did not see a problem with the shed, as long as whites were appointed to preach to the blacks assembled there.

By 1858, the black members were petitioning Shoulder’s Hill for assistance in enlarging “*their* house of worship.”²⁹⁴ The black members had effectively taken ownership of their religious space, albeit under the general oversight of white preachers. Black deacons were actively excluding and restoring members, and church leadership almost always confirmed their decisions. Black treasurers were collecting money from members to help pay the white pastor’s salary.²⁹⁵ In seeking racial separation, Shoulder’s Hill allowed blacks to function as a highly independent arm of the church.

Other churches likewise increasingly held separate meetings for disciplining and preaching to black members.²⁹⁶ In some cases, church records are unclear as to whether whites were actually present to oversee these meetings. In 1860, Beaver Dam Church of Isle of Wight County decided to allow the black members the “privilege” of “exercising” for a half hour after the end of the service in “their part of the house.” The church also voted to allow the black members to worship at “the Stand,” listed as “their former place

²⁹³ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1848, Apr. and May 1849.

²⁹⁴ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1858, emphasis added.

²⁹⁵ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1855.

²⁹⁶ For other examples of separate church meetings, see Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, May 17, 1851; Berea Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1856; Hopeful Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 9, 1858.

of worship,” whenever the church deemed it “necessary.” A few months later, the black members were given Beaver Dam’s old benches “to be used at the Stand.”²⁹⁷ Whether any white members directly supervised what went on after their services and at “the Stand” is not apparent in these entries. What is clear, however, is that blacks at Beaver Dam were gathering quite independently of whites before the beginning of the Civil War.

Biracial fellowship was increasingly circumscribed in the nineteenth century, but in some respects it persisted, and that, too, was an integral feature of life in antebellum Virginia. Signs of cross-racial Christian affection appear in the records of many churches, most commonly in the continued appellation of “brother” and “sister” for both black and white members. While these fraternal titles often went hand in hand with the un-brotherly practice of racial segregation, their usage did serve as an acknowledgement of the redemption and the place in glory black and white Baptists believed they shared. In 1810, Mill Swamp emphasized the sanctity of such terms when it addressed a query (having nothing to do with race) as to whether members could still call excluded people “brother” or “sister.” The church deemed that practice inconsistent with the “order of the Gospel.”²⁹⁸ The Dover Association fielded the same question several years later, and declared it “improper” to bestow Christian titles on those outside the church.²⁹⁹ Thus, black Baptists could carry and employ affectionate spiritual appellations that unredeemed or disobedient white neighbors could not.

Gestures of goodwill sometimes extended beyond the use of spiritual vocabulary. In 1806, the newly formed Wicomoco Baptist Church reported to the Dover Association

²⁹⁷ Beaver Dam Baptist Church Minute Book, 1828-1894, Mar. and Jun., 1860, VBHS.

²⁹⁸ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 31, 1810.

²⁹⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1819*, 6, VBHS

that it was “pleasing to see the love, union, peace and harmony that exists” among the members. Such fellowship reminded the letter’s author “of the saying of Paul, ‘Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all in all.’”³⁰⁰ The records do not indicate whether the black members agreed that Paul’s description of Christian unity fit Wicomoco. Nevertheless, the white clerk’s application of Colossians 3:11 reveals some appreciation for cross-racial fellowship.

Church clerks sometimes referred to deceased members of both races with marked affection. First Baptist of Richmond mourned the “once beloved and now lamented Bro. Hembro Tompkins,” a black deacon, in 1825, and elected Wilson Morris, another black member who was probably a free man, to replace him.³⁰¹ In 1850, Clerk James Jordan of Smithfield Baptist noted that slave member Moses had “departed this life,” and trusted that he had “ascended up to heaven, to dwell with God forever.”³⁰² A few years later, the clerk recorded the death of Knowledge, “a valuable serv’t of Mr. Adkinson & a Devoted pious member of this church,” believing that he was “now enjoying that rest Reserved for the people of God.”³⁰³ Smithfield Baptist recognized these men’s genuine faith, and despite being complicit in their lowly status on earth, acknowledged their exalted status in heaven. Although they still distinguished between black and white, the Four Mile Creek congregation appeared to value the lives of all members when it expressed “devout gratitude to a merciful Providence that none of our

³⁰⁰ Letter to Dover Baptist Association, Oct. 1806, found after Oct. 1807 minutes, Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church Minute Book.

³⁰¹ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 22 and Dec. 6, 1825. Wilson Morris later served as a deacon at the First African Baptist Church, First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 3, 1841. The U.S. Federal Census of 1830 for Richmond, Jefferson Ward, lists Wilson Morris as a free black man.

³⁰² Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 10, 1850.

³⁰³ Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 8, 1854.

white members and so few of our colored were called away by death during the past year.”³⁰⁴

Acts of charity demonstrate the persistence of cross-racial bonds as well. Some congregations sought to provide for impoverished or elderly black members. In 1840, Portsmouth instructed its deacons to “make the necessary arrangements for the support of our old col[ore]d sister Betsy Duvall.” The church then voted to “take up a collection for the relief of our poor members.”³⁰⁵ While the church leaders obviously hoped to assist a number of disadvantaged members, for some reason they singled out Duvall as a subject for special attention.

Likewise, Shoulder’s Hill took up numerous collections to care for free black member Sally Pew.³⁰⁶ In 1847, the church appropriated twenty dollars a year to provide board and clothing for her. That sum increased to twenty-six dollars in October 1849, and to thirty in 1850.³⁰⁷ According to the treasurer’s report, Sally Pew was the only member receiving financial support from the church, and her fund constituted a significant portion of the congregation’s annual budget.³⁰⁸ In 1851, the church appointed a committee to “present the claims of Sally Pue [sic] for aid to the overseers of the poor” of Nansemond County. Evidently, the church leaders were seeking to obtain some form of public relief for this woman; yet the following year, they still collected funds for her.

³⁰⁴ Letter to Dover Baptist Association, Oct. 1843, Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book.

³⁰⁵ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 10, 1840.

³⁰⁶ Alternately spelled “Pue” and “Pugh” in Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book. The U.S. Federal Census of 1840 lists Sally Pugh as a free black head of household (herself and one other female) in Nansemond County.

³⁰⁷ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. and Jul. 1847, Oct. 1849, Dec. 1850.

³⁰⁸ The Treasurer’s report noted that \$26 went to “Board and clothing for Sally Pugh,” \$14.50 for the purchase and installation of a stove pipe, \$4 to the Association Fund, \$97.40 to the Foreign Missionary Society, \$52.27 to the Home Missionary Society, \$20.74 to the General Association, \$38.34 to the Bible Society, \$46.13 to the Education Society, and \$56 to Richmond College. Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, treasurer’s report for 1850 (found after August 1851 record).

They were able to cover a portion of her debts, but ten dollars of her obligations still remained. The deacons then mentioned that they had recently raised ten dollars from collections at “communion seasons,” and they designated that to help support Pew, who died a few weeks later.³⁰⁹

During the same period, South Quay solicited members to provide “immediate relief” for “Sister Sylvia,” a free black woman who had been “dependent entirely on the charity of one of the Brethren.” The church recognized Brown as a “very aged and respectable member” and thought she might be the oldest member of the congregation.³¹⁰ Churches offered assistance to impoverished members in other ways as well. In 1845, Shoulder’s Hill raised three dollars and fifty cents to buy a coffin for Tinory Robinson, “a colored member recently died.”³¹¹ For whatever reason, local Baptist records do not indicate that churches ever raised funds to support poor or aging white members. These cases doubtless demonstrate a sense of racial paternalism among the church leaders, but they also evince genuine white concern for the welfare of black members. In a society that denied blacks many basic rights, that did not guarantee public assistance even to the white poor, and that tended to look askance at impoverished people of both races, the churches’ support must have mattered deeply to Betsy Duvall, Sally Pew, and Sylvia Brown.

In addition to providing for poor members, churches often paid black and white members to serve as sextons, effectively custodians of the church. These men and

³⁰⁹ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 1851, Mar. and Apr. 1852.

³¹⁰ Silvia “of Brown” (see footnote 81); South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1852. The U.S. Federal Census of 1850 lists Silvy Brown as a seventy-year-old free black woman living in the household of Nancy Reed, a 23-year-old free black woman, in Southampton County.

³¹¹ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1845.

women would generally hold the keys to the building and maintain it.³¹² As with the office of pastor, a sexton's salary depended on the size of the church. According to area records, white and black sextons were generally paid equal salaries. Colosse Baptist paid both Fendal, an enslaved member, and Thomas K. Foster, a white member, ten dollars a year to serve as sextons in the 1850s.³¹³ In 1837, after struggling to find a reliable sexton, Portsmouth elected black member Aggy Davis to the position.³¹⁴ A few months later, "some brother" stood up during a church meeting and stated that he thought the congregation should provide "extra compensation" to Davis. The church agreed to give her a bonus of six dollars.³¹⁵ The sexton—presumably still Davis—requested more raises over the next couple of years. The church agreed to raise her monthly compensation from three dollars to three-fifty in 1839, but declined her additional request the following year, informing her that she was "at perfect liberty to resign" if she did not approve of her salary.³¹⁶

Second Baptist in Richmond, a much larger church, first hired free black leader Peter Gilliot as sexton in 1837, at the rate of one hundred dollars per year.³¹⁷ Apparently, Gilliot declined to work for that salary a couple of years later, and, desiring to keep him as sexton, the church voted to increase his salary to \$120, and then to \$150 in the next year. Gilliot continued to attend Second Baptist and serve as sexton in the 1840s, despite

³¹² First Baptist voted to allow only the sexton to keep the keys of the church. First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 22, 1825.

³¹³ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 1854 and Jan. 6, 1855. See also First Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 25, 1834.

³¹⁴ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 10 and May 12, 1837.

³¹⁵ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 7, 1837.

³¹⁶ Portsmouth Baptist (Court Street) Church Minute Book Jul. 12, 1839 and Jan. 10, 1840.

³¹⁷ Alternately spelled "Gilliot" and "Gillett" in Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book.

the establishment of the First African Baptist congregation.³¹⁸ A scandal erupted in 1842 when the black deacons reported that Gilliot had taken a married woman as his wife and then had lied to them about it.³¹⁹ Apparently the church continued to employ him as sexton, however, because they voted to keep his salary at \$150 and give him “a room for sleeping and of the vacant grounds around the [meeting house] for a garden.”³²⁰ Gilliot confessed his sin to the church later that year, and after some debate, he was eventually restored into fellowship.³²¹ By 1847, his salary had increased to \$175 per year.³²²

What black Baptists did with their money is also telling. They frequently supported evangelical projects alongside whites, making contributions—sometimes small, but on other occasions substantial—to church offerings and organizational funds. The statewide General Association reported in 1844 that “colored friends” at Smithfield and Suffolk had offered \$0.33 and \$1.62 to its funds, respectively.³²³ Blacks at Hampton Church sent \$2.38 to the General Association that year for mission work. In 1850, Kempsville Baptist reported that fully 75 percent of its foreign mission funds that year had come from black members, even though only twenty-two of the church’s ninety-four members were black. Some, perhaps most, of those blacks were enslaved, yet they managed to donate an average of \$0.68 each, for a combined total of fifteen dollars. These black members gave a higher average contribution to foreign missions than any congregation in the entire association of fifty-two churches did that year. The second-highest average contribution occurred at Cumberland Street Church in Norfolk, a church

³¹⁸ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 15, 1837, Jun. 27 and Jul. 11, 1839, Jan. 23, 1840, Jan. 27, 1842, Jan. 25, 1844.

³¹⁹ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 29, 1842.

³²⁰ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 25, 1844.

³²¹ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 25, Aug. 22, 1844, Mar. 27, 1845, Mar. 25, 1847.

³²² Second Baptist Church Minute Book, Richmond, Jan. 28, 1847.

³²³ *Proceedings of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1844*, 23.

of 310 whites and twenty blacks, with an average foreign missions donation of thirty cents per person.³²⁴ The Portsmouth Association highlighted the remarkable donations of Kempsville's black members in its annual reports of the early 1850s. Four other churches announced that their black membership had made sizable donations to foreign missions in 1851. Each of these churches held considerable white majorities.³²⁵ Two years later, the association again mentioned that black members from several churches had made contributions to various funds.³²⁶

Blacks also volunteered, or were requested to pledge, their financial support to their local churches. In 1827, a financial committee at First Baptist determined that many free black members were "in a situation to aid the church and many of the slaves are willing and able to contribute their mites also." The committee decided that the black members should be asked to raise three hundred dollars to support the church, a third of what the white members were expected to contribute.³²⁷ At Four Mile Creek, one free black man and three black women (at least two of whom were free), pledged fifty cents each to help pay the pastor in 1835; the average pledge of white men and women that year was about one dollar.³²⁸ Second Baptist recorded the individual donation of

³²⁴ "Statistical Table," *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1850*, 22-23, VBHS. The next three highest average foreign missions contributions were at Portsmouth (membership of 420 whites and 186 blacks), \$0.20 per person; Market Street, Petersburg (membership of 338 whites, 0 blacks), \$0.08 per person, and Shoulder's Hill (membership of 102 whites, 306 blacks), \$0.08 per person.

³²⁵ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1851*, 18-19, VBHS. Hicks' Pond, High Hills, Kempsville, London Bridge, and Portsmouth all reported contributions to the Foreign Mission Fund from black members.

³²⁶ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association, 1853*, 20-21, VBHS. The subject of black Baptists' support of evangelical missions is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3 below.

³²⁷ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 11, 1827.

³²⁸ Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 24, 1835. Hampton Woodfork, Kesiah Feggins, Rebecca Jonathan, and Louisa (last name not given) were all listed as free blacks in the roster at the front of the minute book.

“Brother” William Marshall, a black leader, who gave \$1.69 “for the benefit of the church” in 1832.³²⁹

Like other congregations, this church also appointed black leaders to collect money from black members to help defray church expenses. Second Baptist ruled in 1843 that “every member should contribute to the support of public worship,” and the black leaders were “urgently requested to raise...the sum of \$25” each quarter “to aid in liquidating the debt now due” by the church.³³⁰ Blacks at Sycamore Hill, a branch of Shoulder’s Hill Church, reported that they “wished the pastor to preach for them twice a month,” and that they were willing “to pay \$130.00 towards his salary.”³³¹ The Shoulder’s Hill church fund included \$155 in contributions from black members in 1858 and again in 1859, probably payment for the salary of the white pastor who oversaw them.³³² The membership at Shoulder’s Hill in 1859 totaled 106 whites and 254 blacks—most of the latter enslaved—making the black people’s average donation to the church an impressive \$0.61 per person during those years.³³³

Often blacks earmarked their donations for the upkeep of their own meeting spaces. At Mattaponi, the black members “signified their wish to make some contributions to aid in the repairs of the church,” particularly in maintaining their section

³²⁹ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 18, 1832. When reporting to the Rappahannock Association—which comprised churches to the north of the Dover Association—in 1847, Fairfield Baptist of Northumberland County made special mention of the black members whose willing contributions to church causes were “worthy of the imitation” of all members. In addition to contributing a “fair proportion” of the pastor’s salary and offering gifts for African missions, blacks at Fairfield had made sizeable donations to a church fund that had been established to erect a monument over the graves of two local white Baptist leaders, Fairfield Baptist Church Minute Book, letter to association, 1847, located before Oct. 1847 minutes. See also Fairfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 9, 1846.

³³⁰ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 3, 1843. See also South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 4, 1813; First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 8, 1825; and Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 25, 1842, for other examples.

³³¹ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1855.

³³² Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, treasurer’s report, 1858 and 1859; see also Dec. 1850, Jul. 1852, Jul. 1853, Jul. and Aug., 1854, Aug. 1855, Jun. and Jul. 1856, Oct., 1858, Oct. 1860, Sept. 1862.

³³³ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, letter to Portsmouth Baptist Association, May 1859.

of the building.³³⁴ The black members of Emmaus, who generally met at a separate branch of the church called “Old Chapel” in Charles City County, requested in 1856 “that they might be allowed to contribute towards defraying the expenses of the church” and wanted to know how much they should pay. The church then solicited fifty cents per quarter from each free black member and twelve cents per quarter from each enslaved member. Half of these proceeds went toward improving the property at Emmaus; the other half went toward the construction of a new building—possibly to replace “Old Chapel,” although the minutes do not specify—in Charles City.³³⁵

Throughout the antebellum period, Afro-Baptists across the Tidewater placed significant amounts of money into collection plates. On one hand, the financial gifts of black members evince their participation in biracial evangelical endeavors—funding church expenses, paying pastors, and supporting missionary work. Yet the other side of the coin reveals a growing independence from white Baptists, as in blacks’ faithful contributions specifically to African missions, as well their desire to devote money to their own sections of meeting houses or even their own buildings.

Historians of the Old South tend to agree that blacks and whites negotiated conflicted and complex relationships under the shadow of slavery. Biracial churches provided uniquely fertile spots for such negotiations to develop. Members of both races gathered within the walls of church buildings, month after month, to listen to messages that promised salvation to all those who were faithful to Christ. Congregation members,

³³⁴ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 8, 1842.

³³⁵ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1856, Feb. 1857. Although the church officially moved to the Emmaus meeting house in New Kent County in 1817, it appears that some of the members continued to meet at the old location in Charles City County, Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1817.

both black and white, attended baptisms, took communion, donated money to church causes, and monitored the behavior of their brethren.³³⁶ Especially in small rural churches, blacks and whites regarded one another with familiarity on Sunday mornings. When pastors gave “calls” for baptism, men and women of each race came forward and recounted their conversion experiences, hoping that the congregation would accept them as members. At disciplinary sessions, blacks and whites who were accused of violating Biblical law rose to defend themselves or confess their error before the congregation. Meanwhile, in bustling city churches, blacks assembled in numbers that far surpassed white memberships, often resulting in the creation of semi-autonomous all-black churches—the subject of the following chapter.

While holding black people to be spiritual “brothers” and “sisters,” however, white Baptists generally treated slaves and free blacks as earthly inferiors. They increasingly forced black congregants into church galleries or required them to attend separate meetings. Many churches formally disfranchised black members by the 1840s, and they often—though by no means always—upheld Virginia’s ban on black preaching. All in all, white evangelicals bolstered the slave system by sacralizing a “slaveholding ethic” of Christian paternalism.³³⁷ Whites proved capable of maintaining this paradoxical attitude toward black members, and many blacks proved willing to cope with such inconsistencies in order to belong to a church.

³³⁶ While Tidewater Baptist records offer few instances of black members charging white ones with misconduct, and while some churches probably discouraged or disallowed the practice, the churches did not issue formal rulings on the subject. Blacks also occasionally testified against whites in church trials, as in the case of William Newborn at Suffolk Baptist Church in 1829.

³³⁷ For a discussion of the “slaveholding ethic,” see Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 167-74, and Chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp. 239-41.

Although Baptist organizations were thoroughly dominated by whites and replete with racial inequities, black and white Christians did achieve meaningful fellowship with one another. Too often, accounts of southern evangelicalism seem to pit whites and blacks inexorably in opposition, with Afro-Baptists frequently understood as a people at odds with white Christians, eager to achieve their independence from those who had wronged them. While this meta-narrative contains more than a little truth, it obscures the simple but significant fact that many of these black and white people still chose to attend church with one another throughout the antebellum period. Examples of biracial fellowship cannot obscure the moral failings of white Christians, but they do highlight the ambiguities of daily interactions between southern whites and blacks.³³⁸

Among the paradoxes of southern culture, the biracial church served both to bring blacks and whites together and to draw them apart. Neither idyllic nor despotic, the church afforded blacks significant freedoms while simultaneously supporting their enslavement. Afro-Baptists fairly frequently had to struggle for the opportunities they attained; they sometimes circumvented legal restrictions to do so, often with the full knowledge of their white brethren. For blacks such as Samuel Ellison, Frank Key, and

³³⁸ See Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 285-303; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 185-236; Jewel L. Spangler, "Presbyterians, Baptists, and the Making of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1740-1820" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1996), 268-97, 349-52; Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 46-52, 217-27; Frey, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 172-213; Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 51-53; Charles Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 12-21, 151-68; Scully, *Religion and Nat Turner's Virginia*, 221-32; Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 59-60. As historian Kenneth Bailey reminds us, had southern churches completely aligned themselves with the racial standards of the slaveholding South, "the liberties of blacks in religious activities would have been more narrowly restricted" and the "punctilios that customarily governed white-black interactions would have been adhered to more scrupulously at religious gatherings." Kenneth K. Bailey, "Protestantism and Afro-Americans in the Old South: Another Look," *The Journal of Southern History* 41 (Nov. 1975), 452, 471-72. For other accounts of the persistence of biracial Christianity, see the work of John B. Boles: *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 157-202, and John B. Boles, ed., *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).

Sally Pew, the biracial Baptist church was a complicated, sometimes unpredictable meeting place, but one in which blacks and whites did gather regularly under a Christian banner. The emergence of all-black churches drew many African Americans away from biracial congregations in the late antebellum period, and white Baptists' continued allegiance to the social hierarchy did strain the religious ties that bound black Christians to them. Yet even as the sun was setting on interracial fellowship in the nineteenth century, examples of its persistence offer nuances to deepen our understanding of the Old South.

Chapter 2: “Great Fervency and Power...and the Highest Degree of Comfort”: African American Baptist Churches and Spiritual Leadership in Tidewater Virginia, 1800-1861

On an autumn day in 1818, Abraham Brown and his wife, Susanna, traveled to the county courthouse in Charles City, Virginia, to sign a deed. As founding members of a local congregation of free African Americans, the Browns had decided to donate a portion of their land to the church. For generations to come, their family would remain active members and leaders at the small rural body known as Elam Baptist.¹ Even after the state government and regional Baptist association mandated that white pastors attend all religious gatherings of blacks, the Brown family, along with other black deacons, continued to direct most of the church’s operations. Not only did Abraham and Susanna leave an inheritance of land at Elam; they also left a legacy of leadership that would persist throughout the antebellum period, despite the ever-increasing restrictions on black churches and believers.

Albert Raboteau has described African American religion under slavery as an “invisible institution,” asserting that much of black religious life existed outside the purview of whites, and, later, of historians.² While the religious practices among slaves on plantations did indeed often remain hidden and go unrecorded, many black Baptist churches remained highly conspicuous organizations in the nineteenth-century South.

Mechal Sobel has identified 130 black Baptist churches established in the South before

¹ *History of Elam Baptist Church, Charles City Co., Va., Published on its One Hundredth Anniversary* (Richmond, VA: Reformer Electric Print, 1910), 11-12. The deed was signed on November 20 and recorded on December 17, 1818, Charles City County Land Records, Deed Book 6, 1816-1824, 214-15, microfilm reel 3, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter LVA). For more information on Abraham Brown’s life, sizeable property, and descendants, see Daryl Cumber Dance, *The Lineage of Abraham: The Biography of a Free Black Family in Charles City, VA* ([Virginia: Daryl Dance.], 1998), 9-15, and John M. Coski, “Abram Brown,” in Sara B. Bearss et. al, eds., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography, Vol. 2* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001), 277-79.

² Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), ix.

1864, about half of which were formally incorporated into mixed-race regional associations. Even if a congregation did not generate or preserve its own records, these associations at least traced membership statistics and sundry details for each incorporated church. Other black churches operated independent of the white-led associations, and since most did not leave formal records, Sobel has traced their existence through a variety of sources such as personal narratives.³

By 1860, twelve all-black Baptist churches had been formally constituted in Tidewater Virginia, seven in the Dover Association and five in the Portsmouth Association. Like most black churches in the nineteenth-century South, these congregations were generally located in cities or towns—four in Richmond, three in Petersburg, two in Norfolk, and one in Williamsburg—but two operated in rural areas of Charles City and James City counties. These churches reported more than eight thousand members in 1860—roughly one-fourth of Dover’s total membership and one-third of Portsmouth’s.⁴

These twelve congregations emerged in two distinct periods. Before 1840, black leaders took a primary role in organizing their churches. White Baptists became more

³ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 181-87.

⁴ In 1860, there were 5,511 members of black churches in the Dover Association, out of a total of 19,338 (5,456 whites and 13,882 blacks); Portsmouth reported 3,215 members of black churches, out of a total of 9,431 (4,338 whites and 5,093 blacks). *Minutes of the Seventy-Seventh Annual Session of the Dover Baptist Association, Held with Leigh St. Baptist Church, Richmond, VA., Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, Sept. 18, 19 and 20, 1860* (Richmond: H.K. Ellyson, 1860), 23-28; *Minutes of the Seventieth Annual Session of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association, Held at Black Water Church, Princess Ann Co., May 23^d, 24th and 25th, 1860* (Petersburg: O. Ellyson, 1860), insert, Virginia Baptist Historical Society, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter VBHS). Just outside the region in question, another important black Baptist church was founded by free blacks in Manchester, Virginia in 1821 (today known as the First Baptist Church of South Richmond). This church joined the Middle District Association in 1846 and was the largest congregation in that body. Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 295-96; “Traveling On...: First Baptist, South Richmond, Today and the First Fifty Years, 1821-1871,” Vol. I, in *A Comprehensive History of First Baptist Church, South Richmond, 1821-1993* (Richmond, VA: [First Baptist Church, South Richmond], 1993), 49-119.

involved after 1840, although blacks still held positions of leadership in these bodies. In the 1840s, southern whites took a heightened interest in the religious instruction of blacks, particularly after the split between northern and southern branches of evangelical denominations in the middle of that decade.⁵ Historians have asserted that whites created all-black churches in this period in order to provide systematic, supervised Christian instruction to slaves and to separate the overwhelming numbers of black Baptists from white members. In the words of Ira Berlin, the whites who organized these churches were “motivated by a paternal concern for the black man’s soul, a belief that religion would make it easier to control blacks, and a clear knowledge that their white parishioners had no desire to add to the already swollen” black memberships.⁶

Yet while white southerners did increasingly establish and supervise black churches after 1840, Berlin’s emphasis on paternalism and control overlooks the degree of autonomy that these congregations maintained, especially in the cities of Virginia. Around the same time Berlin published his analysis, Milton Sernett went so far as to state that, by the 1830s, the white South had “closed the door” on black religious freedom and that “any hope for the black church existed with the Negro Christians North of slavery.”

⁵ This subject is examined in greater depth in Chapter 3 below.

⁶ Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974), 292-93, quotation on 292. See also Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921), 131-66; Luther P. Jackson, “Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860,” *Journal of Negro History* 16 (Apr. 1931), 220-26; Walter H. Brooks, “The Evolution of the Negro Baptist Church,” *Journal of Negro History* 7 (Jan. 1922), 11-22; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 136-84, 204; Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 187-88; Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997 [orig. pub. Cambridge University Press, 1993]), 89-90; Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51-53; Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner’s Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740-1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 214-32; Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 20, 169-88.

The independence of southern black churches was, in Sernett's view, "strictly nominal."⁷ According to Luther P. Jackson's much earlier analysis of black religion in the Old Dominion, however, African American churches there regained much of their independence by the 1850s as legal restrictions often "became merely a formality."⁸ Many white Baptist leaders did indeed want to extend their control over black churches in the antebellum years. Yet time constraints, financial burdens, or simple neglect meant that white supervision was often only nominal, and that black deacons were frequently able to preserve their positions of leadership. When tracing the development of Virginia's black Baptist churches before and after the racial laws and denominational changes of the 1830s and 1840s, one finds an interesting paradox. Black evangelicals desired separate meeting spaces because they hoped to exercise more autonomy over their religious activities. White evangelicals desired separate spaces in order to better organize their supervision of blacks.⁹

These contradictory roots of black churches—black autonomy and white control—coexisted as white Baptists installed white pastors to oversee meetings and blacks elected deacons of their own race to maintain the churches' property and finances and to discipline wayward members. Each group proved willing to accommodate the other's desires as a means to achieve its own goals and to serve God's kingdom better.

⁷ Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 110, 114-15.

⁸ Jackson, "Religious Development," 227.

⁹ In 1863, the statewide General Baptist Association of Virginia described its goals for "separate worshipping congregations" of black Baptists in a "Report on the Instruction of Colored People." The report stated that black churches should assemble in "houses of worship, owned by trustees, for the use and benefit of such congregations, with a regular pastor, and the privilege of conducting all matters of Gospel discipline among themselves, subject of course, to the supervision of the church." Reflecting on the black churches that took root in the 1840s, the authors were pleased to note that this "experiment" had "succeeded beyond their expectations," giving "abundant evidences of Divine favor." *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, For the Sessions of 1861, 1862, and 1863* (Richmond: Macfarlane & Fergusson, 1863), 77, VBHS.

Blacks generally cooperated with the white leadership in their churches, and whites frequently allowed blacks significant freedoms, including the authority to direct on their own almost all the business of their separate black congregations.¹⁰ Black Baptists made the most of these opportunities, achieving to an appreciable extent the independence that they would fully achieve in these churches after emancipation.

Black Baptists had gathered independently for worship in Tidewater Virginia since the eighteenth century. According to oral tradition, African Americans established a Baptist congregation in Williamsburg in 1776. This church's early history has not been confirmed with documentary evidence, but it is safe to conclude that outdoor religious meetings and revivals occurred in the area as a result of itinerant preaching. Writing in the early nineteenth century, when many would have remembered the church's origins, Baptist historian Robert Semple associated black preachers Moses (surname unknown) and Gowan Pamphlet with the establishment of the Williamsburg Baptist Church.¹¹

¹⁰ While this dynamic of accommodation seems to reflect Eugene Genovese's analysis of paternalism, it is important to note that, despite restrictions, black and white Baptists operated in a far more equitable relationship than that of slaves and masters. Racial domination characterized the latter relationship, and though racism was a strong presence in Baptist churches, the shared Christian process of conviction, repentance, baptism, and salvation still formed the basis of interactions. Additionally, white Baptists' continual acceptance of black leaders supported blacks' religious autonomy and authority in southern society. For Genovese's discussion of paternalism, see *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 3-7.

¹¹ Robert Baylor Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, rev. ed. (Lafayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1976 [orig. pub. Richmond, 1810]), 148. One of the earliest accounts of Virginia Baptists, Semple published this history in 1810, and it remains one of the foremost studies of early Virginia Baptist history. See also John Asplund, *The Universal Register of the Baptist Denomination in North America, for the years 1790, 1791, 1792, 1793 and part of 1794* (Boston: John W. Folsom, 1794), 50; Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, 1965, distributed by the University Press of Virginia), 152-58; Linda Rowe, Reference Queries: "Rationale for outdoor African American religious meeting," June 4, 1991, and "What is First about First Baptist Church in Williamsburg?" May 30, 1989, in the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg (hereafter Rockefeller Library); Jackson, "Religious Development," 170-71; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 306-07; Tommy L. Bogger, *Since 1776: The History of First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Virginia* (Williamsburg, VA: First Baptist Church, [2006]), vi-viii, 12.

As a traveling preacher, Moses apparently held religious services for blacks in places around Williamsburg, probably gathering under brush arbors at Green Spring plantation and Raccoon Chase, during the 1770s.¹² Semple reported that Moses was “often taken up and whipped” for leading these lively gatherings—probably by local authorities, although the author did not specify.¹³ Both Baptist dissenters and slave assemblies had faced opposition from civil authorities in colonial Virginia; thus meetings of black Baptists may well have seemed doubly threatening to certain members of the community.¹⁴ Legislators had attempted to regulate “unlawful” assemblies of slaves throughout the eighteenth century, mandating “stripes” for those gathered in “tumultuous” groups and for those meeting without permission or at night.¹⁵

After Moses decided to leave Williamsburg sometime in the 1770s, Gowan Pamphlet, a slave of local tavernkeeper Jane Vobe, took charge of the black meetings and baptisms.¹⁶ According to Semple, the statewide General Baptist Association of Virginia warned Pamphlet that “no person of color should be allowed to preach” and threatened

¹² Linda H. Rowe, “Historic Green Spring, Moses, Gowan Pamphlet, and North America’s First Black-led Baptist Church,” Essays: “Voices of Green Spring”: 200 Years of American History, Green Spring Plantation Resources, at Friends of the National Park Service for Green Spring, Inc., <http://www.historicgreenspring.org/voices/HGSMosesGowanPamphlet.pdf> (accessed Feb. 25, 2012); Bogger, *Since 1776*, 12.

¹³ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 148.

¹⁴ Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists’ Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765-1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 31 (Jul. 1974), 346-68.

¹⁵ Laws of Virginia, 1723, Chap. IV:VIII and IX, in William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, Vol. 4 (Richmond: W.W. Gray, 1820), 128-29; “tumultuous” in Chap. IV:I, 126; Laws of Virginia, 1748, Chap. XXXVIII:XIII and XIV, in Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large, Vol. VI*, 107-08; Acts of the General Assembly, 1785, Chap. LXXVII:IV, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia...One Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighty-Five* (Richmond: John Dunlap), 60, “stripes” in Chap. LXXVII:IV, 60. The law did state, however, that nothing should “prohibit slaves repairing to and meeting at church to attend divine service, on the Lord’s day, or any other time set apart by lawful authority, for public worship: But that all and every such meetings, shall be accounted lawful meetings,” 1723, Chap. IV:IX, Hening, ed., *Statutes, Vol. 4*, 129 and 1748, Chap. XXXVIII:XIV, Hening, ed., *Statutes, Vol. VI*, 108.

¹⁶ For a more detailed account of Pamphlet’s fascinating life, see Linda H. Rowe, “A Biographical Sketch of Gowan Pamphlet,” Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg, http://research.history.org/Historical_Research/Research_Themes/ThemeReligion/Gowan.cfm (accessed Aug. 8, 2012).

excommunication for doing so.¹⁷ Perhaps white Baptist leaders feared that Pamphlet's widely popular sermons and crowded meetings would create further legal problems for the Baptist denomination. Although they were known for challenging traditional social mores, these Baptists appear to have been unwilling to do so by defending black preachers.

Despite these obstacles, Pamphlet persisted in his calling. In October of 1791, he traveled to Mathews County on the Middle Peninsula for the annual meeting of the Dover Baptist Association and presented his church of approximately five hundred people for admission into that body.¹⁸ In contrast to the General Association's resistance to black preachers, the Dover delegates were willing to listen. Associations usually waited a year or two to incorporate new churches, sending delegates in the meantime to inspect the nascent congregations. Despite Pamphlet's alleged involvement in a rumored slave plot that extended from Richmond to Charleston, South Carolina, during the summer of 1793—for which the governor of Virginia specifically identified him as a messenger—the Dover Association still sanctioned this black preacher's ministry in Williamsburg.¹⁹ That October, the Dover Association formally accepted Pamphlet's church—its first all-black congregation. Pamphlet, again in attendance at the annual meeting, had been manumitted by his master the previous month. Perhaps he informed the association of

¹⁷ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 148.

¹⁸ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 148.

¹⁹ Pamphlet reportedly dropped a letter describing the conspiracy while walking down a street in Yorktown. Rowe, "Biographical Sketch of Gowan Pamphlet"; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 667-68. Colonial Williamsburg historian Linda Rowe believes that Pamphlet "laid low" for several weeks after dropping the letter, and the "trouble somehow blew over." Rowe, "Biographical Sketch of Gowan Pamphlet."

this development, which in turn bolstered his standing as a pastor despite the controversy that had surrounded him that summer.²⁰

The association noted that Pamphlet's congregation "could not have done better in their circumstances than they have," and recommended that "some of the neighboring ministers...visit and assist them in setting in order what shall appear to be wanting."²¹ This sort of paternal oversight of young churches was not peculiar to black congregations. New and struggling churches within the association were usually placed under the care of nearby ministers. One can only speculate what was meant by the phrase, "they could not have done better in their circumstances than they have." Perhaps the association sympathized with black preachers and assemblies as they faced restraints imposed by slaveholders and civil authorities. Though certainly not proponents of racial equality, white Baptists did view African Americans as Christian brethren, offering a relationship notably different from the traditional racial order.

For the next several decades, the Williamsburg Church sent black representatives to the annual meetings of the Dover Baptist Association. Because individual congregations selected their own delegates, the black representatives were mostly likely also elders, deacons, and preachers in the church, including Gowan Pamphlet, the pastor, who attended the associational meetings until his death in 1807. Delegates James Robert, Benjamin White, and Israel Camp—all free blacks—represented the church most frequently during the next several years. Israel Camp, well known in York County as a Baptist preacher, was set free by his master, the Reverend John Bracken—rector of

²⁰ York County Land Records, Deed Book 7, 1791–1809, 92, microfilm reel 18, LVA, cited in Rowe, "Biographical Sketch of Gowan Pamphlet," fn 17.

²¹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1793*, 4.

Bruton Parish and future president of the College of William and Mary—in 1810.²² Until the late 1820s, when a second Baptist church formed in Williamsburg, the association minutes referred to the black Baptist church simply as “Williamsburg,” and not “Williamsburg African”; white Baptists surely took note of their Williamsburg brethren’s color, but they did not feel a need to note it explicitly. All in all, the association seems to have received the black church on an equal footing with white churches during this period.

From its inception, the Williamsburg church housed one of the largest Baptist congregations in Virginia. The church claimed a few hundred members during the 1790s, and when the association minutes began recording total numbers of congregants and baptisms, Williamsburg posted impressive numbers. In 1810, the Dover Association recorded the total fellowship of the Williamsburg church at 496, the highest of the church populations listed. By 1824, the membership had reached seven hundred.²³

Williamsburg’s membership included slaves and free blacks from the town and outlying regions. While the exact ratio of slaves to free blacks in the church is unknown, it may have resembled the ratio in the overall population of James City and York counties—six slaves to one free black in 1810 and three or four slaves to one free black in 1820. The church’s leadership, however, was almost entirely free.²⁴

²² *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association*, years 1793-1814. For James Robert, see U.S. Federal Census of 1810, York County; for Benjamin White, see U.S. Federal Census of 1820, James City County; for Israel Camp, see Free Black Register, York County, Aug. 20, 1810, in Department of Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg. The Dover minutes spelled his last name “Camp,” while the Free Black Register spelled it “Kemp.” Daphne Gentry, “John Bracken,” in Sara B. Bearss et al., eds., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2 (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001), 179-80.

²³ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1810*, 4; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1824*, 3.

²⁴ U.S. Federal Census of 1810 and 1820, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html> (accessed Feb. 26, 2010).

While some white residents of Williamsburg probably viewed the black church with suspicion, particularly in light of the state's laws concerning slave gatherings, others offered their support. The congregation's locations during its early years remain unclear. After obtaining his freedom, Pamphlet acquired a small lot in the town as well as fourteen acres two miles away in James City County. Perhaps Pamphlet held services on his land; most likely the congregation met at several different spots. Sometime in the early nineteenth century, however, Jesse Cole, a local white landowner, invited the black Baptists to worship in his carriage house on Nassau Street in Williamsburg. Unable to find a deed for the lot's transfer from Cole to the Baptist church, Colonial Williamsburg historian Linda Rowe still believes that a deed had to have been recorded sometime before 1818, when the land tax records identified "the Baptist meeting house" as the southern boundary of a neighboring lot. Oral history sources also confirm Cole's donation of the lot to the black congregation. It appears that black Baptists held services in the carriage house until they constructed a brick building on the same street in 1855.²⁵

Although it functioned as an independent body in the early nineteenth century, Williamsburg Baptist Church still sought the assistance of the Dover Association on thorny issues, as did other congregations. In 1820, black delegates Jeffrey Barret and John Alvis attended the annual meeting and reported on "difficulties existing" among members of their church. The association appointed three outside elders to visit and help

²⁵ Rowe, "Biographical Sketch of Gowan Pamphlet," fns 20 and 21; Patricia Samford, "First Baptist Church Archaeological Report, Block 38, Building 33, 1985," in Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Report Series-1621 (1990), Colonial Williamsburg Digital Library, <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=ResearchReports%5CRR1621.xml> (accessed Aug. 8, 2012). A church history cited by Bogger states that a Robert F. Coles gave the land and building to the church, but Rowe's research shows a first name of Jesse. Bogger, *Since 1776*, 12. Additionally, Rowe cites Jesse Cole's surname as "Coles," but the U.S. Federal Censuses of 1820, 1830, and 1840 for Williamsburg and James City Counties only include a "Jesse Cole"—recorded in 1830 as living in the vicinity of the "Lunatic Hospital," which was located close to Nassau Street.

settle the problem.²⁶ Six years later, the congregation was struggling again, and a group of people who had been excluded by the church petitioned the association, probably hoping that Dover would intervene to have them readmitted. The Dover Association, however, upheld the ruling of Williamsburg's leaders.²⁷

In the late 1820s, the association began to supervise the congregation more closely, establishing a standing "Committee of Inspection and Direction of the African Church of Williamsburg."²⁸ Perhaps this change in posture resulted from heightened racism among white evangelicals and a fear of black religious independence. Indeed, historian W. Harrison Daniel has concluded that white Baptists were reining in blacks' autonomy well before the Virginia legislature passed the restrictions of 1832 in response to Nat Turner's rebellion.²⁹ Yet it may be that the association formed this committee simply because of the internal difficulties the congregation had faced that decade, as a way to assist an overburdened church. Two other bodies—a black congregation "claiming the privilege of being an African church" in Charles City County and a struggling mixed-race congregation at Yeocomico—were also placed under supervision at the same time as the Williamsburg church.³⁰ Baptist associations involved themselves in the affairs of white, black, and interracial congregations. It may be that both racial considerations and more generic concerns played a part in the supervisory committee's formation.

²⁶ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1820*, 4, 8.

²⁷ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1825*, 7.

²⁸ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1827*, 7; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1828*, 5; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1829*, 6; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1830*, 6; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1831*, 5.

²⁹ W. Harrison Daniel, "Virginia Baptists and the Negro in the Antebellum Era," *Journal of Negro History* 55 (Jan. 1971), 2-4.

³⁰ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1827*, 7; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1828*, 5.

In any event, the committee installed by the Dover Association consistently found the Williamsburg church's operations "satisfactory," and the congregation managed to maintain much of its autonomy. Members elected black leaders with the full knowledge of the Dover Baptist Association. In 1828, the church queried the association: "Is it proper that a bond man should be a Deacon?" Perhaps the church felt the need to seek formal approval for slave deacons in that year because of Dover's recent oversight of the congregation's government, or perhaps because the leadership had traditionally been free. Either way, the Dover Association saw no problem with ordaining slaves to serve as deacons and answered the black congregation's query in the affirmative.³¹

The following year, John Dipper, a free black man, received his license to preach from Williamsburg African. Freed at age thirty-eight in 1816, Dipper had purchased his wife Edey's freedom in 1818. In 1830, the census listed Dipper as the owner of four slaves, one of whom may have been his own son, Thomas, whom Dipper had purchased earlier that year.³² Dipper's personal papers indicate, in fact, that he hired, bought, and sold slaves during the 1820s and early 1830s. While free blacks slaveowners often only "owned" family members in order to prevent them from having to leave the state after

³¹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1828*, 7. Bogger writes that the Dover Association reported in 1828 that Williamsburg African had erected a new building and reorganized, but Dover's records make no mention of these events during that period. Bogger, *Since 1776*, 13. Instead, Dover's minutes show that the church "reorganized" in 1843; see pp. 153-56 of this chapter, below.

³² The U.S. Federal Census of 1830, York County, lists John Dipper's household as including one free black male between 36 and 55 (presumably Dipper), one free black female between 24 and 36 (presumably Dipper's wife), one enslaved male under 10, two enslaved females under 10, and one enslaved female between 36 and 55. Bill of Sale, Dec. 30, 1816, Robert Scott to William Browne, selling Dipper for \$450; Deed of Emancipation, Dec. 31, 1816, William Browne to John Dipper; Deed, Apr. 27, 1818, Robert Scott to John Dipper, transferring ownership of Edey Dipper; Deed of Emancipation, May 15, 1818, John Dipper to Edey Dipper; Bill of Sale, Mar. 25, 1830, Robert Scott to John Dipper, purchasing ownership of Thomas Dipper, John Dipper Papers, 1816-1838, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 1, New Jersey Historical Society (hereafter NJHS), Newark, NJ; also available in the Rockefeller Library. For a detailed analysis of Dipper's life using the documents in this collection, see Carl Lane and Rhoda Freeman, "John Dipper and the Experience of the Free Black Elite, 1816-1836," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100 (Oct. 1992), 485-514; see 494-95 for Dipper's activities as a slaveholder.

manumission according to Virginia's law of 1806, others engaged in the practice for commercial gain. It seems that Dipper participated in the slave market for both these reasons.³³ Skilled as a bootmaker and successful as a local creditor and investor, this "profit-oriented freeman" moved between the worlds of slaves, elite free blacks, and whites—modeling, according to scholars Carl Lane and Rhoda Freeman, the entrepreneurial and individualistic spirit of Jacksonian America and entangling himself in the southern economy of racial slavery.³⁴ He also received a gun license in 1825, in accordance with the law of 1806 that required free blacks to obtain licenses in order to possess firearms.³⁵ Satisfying the court that he was a person "of probity and good demeanor" when requesting his license, Dipper was evidently a well-respected member of the Williamsburg community.³⁶

In issuing Dipper's preaching license, free black delegate Benjamin White presented the new preacher to the Dover Association:

Be it known, that our beloved Brother John Dipper member of this church, in full fellowship and good standing; being in our estimation, possessed of gifts in the way of exhortation and preaching, which appear to promise usefulness in the cause of Christ; is hereby sanctioned within the borders of our own church, but [also] in the region round about, wherever it may appear that the way is open

³³ In March of 1832, the Virginia General Assembly banned free blacks from owning slaves, aside from one's spouse and children. Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:3, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly... One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Two* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 22. It appears Dipper sold the last of his slaves—who were not family members—between 1832 and 1833 (after this law was passed) in order to settle with creditors. Lane and Freeman, "John Dipper," 494-95. For the expulsion law of 1806, see Acts of the General Assembly, Chap. 63:10, in Samuel Shepherd, ed., *The Statutes at Large of Virginia, from October Session 1792, to December Session 1806* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1836), 3:252. See also Philip J. Schwarz, "Emancipators, Protectors, and Anomalies: Free Black Slaveowners in Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 95 (Jul., 1987), 317-38.

³⁴ Lane and Freeman, "John Dipper," 495-98, 514, quotation on 497.

³⁵ Acts of the General Assembly, 1806, Chap. XCIV:1, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia... One Thousand Eight Hundred and Five* (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants), 51. As was the case with Virginia's other black laws, this statute was not always enforced; for examples of this in Prince Edward County, see Melvin Patrick Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 181-86.

³⁶ John Dipper's license to carry a gun in Williamsburg, Mar. 1, 1825, in John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 3, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library.

before him. And we do hereby recommend him to [the] kind attention of the Brethren and friends of Religion wherever he may come.³⁷

According to the congregational model of Baptist governance, Dipper had to prove his possession of “gifts in the way of exhortation and preaching” not to the white-led association, but rather to the black leadership within his own congregation. Dover’s approval of slave deacons and acceptance of preacher Dipper as an associational delegate complicates Daniel’s claim that white Baptists were curtailing the religious autonomy of blacks before Nat Turner’s Rebellion. Dipper’s influence spread as far as Lynchburg; he corresponded with his wife while on a preaching trip there a few months after receiving his license.³⁸

Although the population of First Baptist in Richmond surpassed that of Williamsburg sometime in the late 1820s, Williamsburg remained one of the largest congregations in the association until the late 1830s. Not only did it boast impressive baptism figures; it also recorded a high number of disciplinary exclusions.³⁹ As in biracial congregations, blacks often excluded their peers from church fellowship, particularly for offenses of sexual immorality.

Williamsburg African’s record book has not survived; thus accounts of individual discipline cases are rare. A letter in John Dipper’s personal papers, however, offers clues about the offenses and struggles within this congregation. John Locust, a free black member, wrote Dipper of the “painful necessity” of reporting a certain member’s “unbridled license of the tongue.” According to Locust, Letty Young had “deliberately

³⁷ John Dipper’s license to preach, Aug. 2, 1829, in John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 3, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library.

³⁸ John Dipper to Polly Dipper, Nov. 24, 1829, in John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 2, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library.

³⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association*, years 1824-1830.

and with malice” called Locust a liar twelve times when speaking with Julia Rowsay, a “respectable female.” Young allegedly threatened that she “would have no hesitation in scalding [Locust] with a tea-kettle of boiling water,” not caring whether the church excluded her. Writing that Young was “intoxicated with passion,” Locust described her threats as enough to make Rowsay’s blood “run cold.”⁴⁰ Locust’s account reveals a deep concern for his own reputation—indeed, for what historians of the white Old South often call “honor”—and a regard for “respectable” female members who could control their passions and their tongues.⁴¹ Similar cases of internal strife could be found in mixed-race congregations as well; white and black Baptists alike were disciplined for slander and quarreling.

On the eve of Nat Turner’s uprising, the Williamsburg African Church was a bustling congregation of more than six hundred men and women.⁴² Their meeting house stood as a widely recognized landmark of autonomous black worship in the center of town. Although the Dover Association was becoming more involved in the affairs of this body, the congregants still chose their own leadership, licensed their own preachers, and regularly disciplined deviant members.

⁴⁰ Locust was almost certainly the same free black “John Locus” identified in the Free Black Register of York County sometime between 1819 and 1822. See Free Black Register, York County, n.d. [this record is between 1819 and 1822 entries in the register], Department of Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg. John Locust to John Dipper, n.d. [sometime during John Dipper’s ministry at Williamsburg African, 1829-1832], John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 2, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library.

⁴¹ Betram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴² *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1830*, 1-3.

A few dozen miles inland from Williamsburg, black Baptists in the Petersburg area also shaped a strong heritage of autonomous religious activity. As at Williamsburg African, these Baptists managed to navigate an independent path while still submitting to the increasing attentions of the white-led association. The First African Baptist Church in Petersburg challenges Williamsburg's claim of being the first black Baptist church in Virginia.⁴³ According to Sobel, this congregation emerged when white Baptist preachers ministered to slaves on the plantation of William Byrd III in Lunenburg County (in a district located today in Mecklenburg County) during the 1750s. This body, known as the Bluestone Church, operated under the leadership of white and black ministers at different points in the eighteenth century, scattering in the late 1750s and regrouping in 1772.⁴⁴

Around 1820, the members of the Bluestone body, led by black elder John Benn, relocated to the city of Petersburg.⁴⁵ The records of the Portsmouth Association first mention this congregation in 1826, when its black leaders petitioned for admission into that organization. Describing the church as "a Society in Petersburg, stiling [sic] itself 'The African Baptist Church of Christ in Petersburg,'" Portsmouth sent three

⁴³ This church, known as the Harrison Street Baptist Church after the Civil War, is now the First Baptist Church of Petersburg. Jackson, "Religious Development," 188-90, see also 188 fn 58.

⁴⁴ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 291-92; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 102, 296, 299, 422, fns 83 and 86; William Henry Sherwood, "History of the Church, From 1856-1885," in *Life of Charles B. W. Gordon, Pastor of the First Baptist Church, Petersburg, Virginia, and History of the Church* (Petersburg, VA: John B. Ege, 1885), 52-53, Special Collections, LVA.

⁴⁵ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 102, 296, 299, 422 fns 83 and 86. Henry H. Mitchell disagrees with Sobel's account of this church, contending that it was more probable that the congregation first gathered in Prince George County on a small tract of land Byrd owned there. When their meeting house burned down (apparently around 1820, although Mitchell does not provide a date), the congregation simply would have needed to migrate from neighboring Prince George County to Petersburg, rather than traveling ninety miles from Lunenburg. Unfortunately Mitchell does not identify his specific source, merely pointing to "church records." Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 54-57. A church history merely states that the "first membership," which came from Prince George and Charles City counties, remained "scattered" during the 1750s and 1760s, but was eventually organized by Rev. John Michaels on the "estate of Col Byrd, on James river." Sherwood, "History of the Church," 53.

representatives to “enquire into the state” of this fellowship.⁴⁶ At the next annual meeting, this committee reported that the church’s “moral standing was good,” and vouched for the “moral standing and piety” of Daniel Jackson, the free black pastor. Since the committee had been unable to learn about the church’s “faith and doctrines,” however, the association named a second delegation to “inquire more particularly into the faith and order” of the congregation. Because the African church incorporated people from the counties of Prince George, Surry, and Charles City, delegates from the Dover Association were invited to join the committee as well.⁴⁷

After conducting its inquiry, the committee recommended that the African Church of Petersburg not be admitted as a “constituent member.” The other delegates to the Portsmouth Association unanimously agreed and resolved that “the constitution of independent and coloured Churches in this State, and their representation in this body, involves a point of great delicacy, which may probably lead to the most unpleasant results.” The association then ruled that white delegates should now represent Gillfield Baptist, the other black Baptist church in Petersburg, which had previously sent its own representatives.⁴⁸ The following year, the African Church of Petersburg reapplied to the association, but did so through white delegates from a mixed-race church. After “pledging to represent herself through white Delegates” thereafter, the African church of approximately five hundred members was finally admitted.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1826*, 4.

⁴⁷ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1827*, 4-5; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1827*, 7.

⁴⁸ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1828*, 5.

⁴⁹ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1829*, 4; *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1830*, 3.

Unlike the Dover Association, which permitted black delegates to represent their churches throughout the antebellum period, the Portsmouth Association prevented blacks from serving as voting representatives after 1828. Yet despite this move to exercise greater control over black congregations, Portsmouth had little to do with the churches' week-to-week affairs. The association did not attempt to remove Daniel Jackson, the free black pastor, or the other black church leaders, from their positions in the Petersburg church. When the state banned black preaching in 1832, the association sent white pastors to oversee the congregation, but again, black deacons still maintained considerable power in much of the church's business.

While the membership of the Petersburg African consisted mainly of enslaved people, Gillfield's early population included many free blacks and even some whites. Founded in 1788 as a mixed-race church in Prince George County, the congregation was originally known as Davenport's.⁵⁰ The church wished to send free black delegates to the Portsmouth meetings, and in 1794, someone in the association questioned whether it was "agreeable to the Word of God" to let them do so. Portsmouth voted that nothing in the scriptures or "rules of decency" prohibited this and welcomed any elected male member to serve as a delegate, a policy that would stand for thirty years before white delegates overturned it.⁵¹ Until then, Davenport's (and later Gillfield) sent black men to represent the congregation at the association. White minister James Wright and free black member

⁵⁰ Asplund, *Register...1794*, 30; Jackson, "Religious Development," 190; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 300.

⁵¹ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1794*, 6.

Israel Decoudry served as delegates in the 1790s and early 1800s.⁵² Decoudry had emigrated from the West Indies with the Comte de Grasse during the Revolutionary War and served as a leader at Gillfield Baptist for about forty years before his death in 1829.⁵³

At some point before 1809, the black members of Davenport's Church began worshipping independently. They established a regular meeting place by renting a plot of land, Sandy Beach on the Appomattox River, in 1809 or 1810.⁵⁴ The Sandy Beach congregation of 270 members applied to the Portsmouth Association in 1810, and since "satisfaction [was] given of their faith and order," they were admitted.⁵⁵ Early delegates from Sandy Beach included free blacks Jacob Brander and Whirle Sykes, who were also ordained as deacons by the church.⁵⁶

While the church licensed several black men to preach, they elected a white man, "Brother" W.H. Pittman, to serve as regular pastor from 1815 to about 1819.⁵⁷ Perhaps the members thought Pittman's presence would help fend off potential criticisms or threats to this highly independent black religious assembly. Black leaders including Sykes, Brander, and others saw to the weekly business of the church, however, including

⁵² *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association*, years 1797-1809. Israel Decoudry was also recorded as "Decodry," "Ducudre," "D. Cudre," "Decudree," "Decudra," and "Deceedry," in the Portsmouth Baptist Association Minutes.

⁵³ Apparently, Israel Decoudry's reputation extended as far as New York City. The African American newspaper *Freedom's Journal* printed his obituary, describing him as an "affectionate husband, a tender father, [and] a pious humble christian" who was "ardent in his attachment to the Church of God, and more particularly so in the decline of life." *Freedom's Journal*, Jan. 9, 1829.

⁵⁴ In 1810, Semple wrote that the black members of Davenport's had "built a meetinghouse" and held "worship regularly through their preachers of color." Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 467. Richard Kennard, *A Short History of the Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg Virginia*, compiled by William H. Johnson (Petersburg: Frank A. Owen, 1903), 13; Jackson, "Religious Development," 190; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 300.

⁵⁵ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1810*, 3.

⁵⁶ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association*, years 1812-1816; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1815-1831, February and April 1, 1815, VBHS. "Whirle" Sykes was also recorded as "Worrell" Sykes.

⁵⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 6, 1815.

the collection and payment of Pittman's salary and even a bonus to repair his house in November of 1815.⁵⁸

Although Pittman's exact duties as pastor remain unclear, he probably led many of the church's worship services, administered communion, solemnized marriages, and performed baptisms. Black men continued to receive preaching licenses from the church during his tenure, and black leaders continued to oversee this process. In 1815, the congregation ruled that no member should attempt to "labor in public [preach] without leave from the Church."⁵⁹ Four black men were licensed to preach that year.⁶⁰

By 1818, the membership of Sandy Beach had expanded to almost four hundred, and the church leaders decided to find a more permanent meeting place.⁶¹ The congregation voted to purchase a lot called "Gill's field" on present-day Perry Street in Petersburg and began constructing a thirty-foot-square meeting house there.⁶² Whirle Sykes and five other free blacks served as trustees of the property, initially paying \$100 of the sale price of \$550. To defray the remaining debt, the trustees published a "subscription paper" to "present to the white people of this, or any, other place," asking

⁵⁸ Other black leaders included Richard Jarratt, Jacob Howell, and Colston Waring, Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 2 and Nov. 4, 1815. Richard Jarratt, a Petersburg boatman, owned a sizeable amount of real estate in the city. Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1942), 144 fn 19. Waring, whose name was also recorded in church minutes as "Warring" and "Warren," was authorized to "exercise a public gift" to preach and organize meetings in 1815, and was ordained as an elder in 1823. In 1824, he emigrated to Liberia with his family and almost one hundred free blacks, where he would later serve as vice agent. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 2, 1815 and Jan. 19, 1823; Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 69, 154-55.

⁵⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 15, 1815.

⁶⁰ James Brown, Colston Waring, Lewis Adams, and James Tazwell received preaching licenses. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 3, Oct. 2 and 15, Nov. 19, 1815.

⁶¹ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1818*, 3.

⁶² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 11 and 15, Mar. 1, and Apr. 9, 1818; Jackson, "Religious Development," 193.

them to pledge contributions.⁶³ Apparently, Gillfield received enough donations to finish purchasing the property in four annual payments.⁶⁴

Although blacks and whites increasingly worshipped separately in the decades before the Civil War—particularly in urban areas—interracial collaboration, such as the assistance of whites in building Gillfield’s meeting house, also occurred. The antebellum South was replete with contradictions and complexities, and nowhere more so than in evangelical communities. Evincing their commitment to the biracial Baptist community, delegates from Gillfield made the trip to the Portsmouth Association every May, traveling by “land or water” to meetings that changed location each year. Gillfield’s representatives, like those of other churches, regularly brought significant financial contributions that had been raised by the congregation in support of the association. Until the 1830s, Gillfield was the largest church in the Portsmouth Association, at which point it was surpassed only by Petersburg African.⁶⁵

Religious exchanges not only crossed racial boundaries in Petersburg, but sometimes denominational ones as well. In 1816, Petersburg’s Methodist Church—a white-led body—invited the members of Gillfield to “join them in a fast.”⁶⁶ The Gillfield congregation indeed appeared willing to assist white evangelicals in a variety of ways. In 1822, Gillfield collaborated with the newly formed white Market Street Baptist Church to host the Portsmouth Association’s annual meeting in Petersburg, offering to find accommodations for the visiting ministers and care for their horses. Members of Gillfield

⁶³ Howell and Waring also served as trustees. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 1, 1818.

⁶⁴ Petersburg Land Records, Hustings Court, Deed Book 5, 1816-1818, 261, microfilm reel 3, LVA.

⁶⁵ Luther P. Jackson, *A Short History of the Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg, Virginia*, compiled by F.H. Norris (Petersburg: Virginia Printing Co., Inc., 1937), 14; *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association ... 1833*, 15.

⁶⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 6, 1816.

then went about “scouring out the meeting house,” “cleaning the branch candlestick,” and providing “blacking for cleaning boots and shoes.” The association met in different locations each year, and host churches took pride in seeing to the comfort of their guests. Gillfield and Market Street apparently pooled their resources to do just that.⁶⁷ When Market Street needed financial assistance in 1823, Gillfield volunteered to raise money to support a pastor there. Later that year, Market Street requested and received Gillfield’s aid in constructing a meeting house.⁶⁸

While providing assistance to the fledgling Market Street Church, Gillfield’s leaders also accepted, at least for the moment, that church’s involvement in their own congregation. When Market Street offered the “services” of a “Brother” Ballentine—probably to act as a temporary pastor for Gillfield—black leaders Decoudry, Howell, and Daniel Scott requested that Ballentine attend their meetings once a month and more often “when convenient.”⁶⁹ White “supply,” or visiting, ministers served at Gillfield at various points in the 1820s.⁷⁰ At first, Gillfield seemed to welcome the involvement of white men such as Pittman and Ballentine, perhaps out of a regard for interracial fellowship as well as an understanding that the involvement of white ministers might help defuse such local opposition as the expanding black congregation might encounter.

Yet once again, the black leaders retained authority in the church. These men preached before the congregation, mediated conflicts among brethren, held disciplinary trials for accused members, collected money for operating expenses, and maintained

⁶⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 21 and 28, 1822.

⁶⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 9 and Sept. 28, 1823. Market Street became a member of the Portsmouth Association in 1819, but Portsmouth delegates had been petitioning surrounding churches for funds to build a meeting house in Petersburg since 1811. *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association*, years 1811-1819.

⁶⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 16, 1822.

⁷⁰ Kennard, *Short History of Gillfield Baptist Church*, 17.

church property. As in interracial churches, the black leadership continued to enforce stringent regulations on preaching. After giving a sermon before the church in 1820, James Tazwell, a free black member, was found guilty of “preaching erroneous doctrine,” and the congregation voted to expel him.⁷¹ Within a year, however, the church restored Tazwell to his “ministerial office.”⁷² At a meeting in 1821, black leaders examined Benjamin Griffin, who believed he had a calling to preach. The leaders found him “not sufficient for the great work,” and therefore only permitted him to exhort. Gillfield’s licensed preachers could call on Griffin, or any of the other exhorters, for assistance in leading services.⁷³ Several months later, some members reported that they had seen Griffin preaching in Richmond, and church leaders feared that “in consequence of his inability he [had] exposed this church and himself.” They ordered an investigation into Griffin’s case, but Gillfield’s records do not indicate what happened after that.⁷⁴ When member Peter Mathews attempted to preach after the church forbade him, however, he was promptly expelled from fellowship.⁷⁵

As in white-led churches, Gillfield’s members regularly policed deviant behavior in each other’s lives. Offenses such as adultery, intoxication, fighting, slander, gossip, violating the Sabbath, and many others appear throughout the records of black and mixed-race churches alike. Baptist churches were continually concerned with what went on in the homes of members. “Sisters” Charlotte Bailey and Moriah Richerson, for instance, were expelled from Gillfield in 1817 for “keeping a disorderly house”—which

⁷¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 16, 1820.

⁷² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, May 20, 1821.

⁷³ Gillfield’s licensed preachers at that time were Israel Decourdry, Jacob Howell, James Tazwell, and Colston Waring. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 19, 1821.

⁷⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 2 and Sept. 15, 1822.

⁷⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 2, 1825.

in that time was a common way of referring to a house harboring prostitution or other misconduct.⁷⁶ Discussion of a perhaps similar offense arose a couple years later when James Gillis, presumably alluding to the alleged conduct of a fellow congregant, queried whether it was right for members to “keep opened doors for the accommodation of ladies of pleasure at their discretion.” As Gillis no doubt anticipated, the church responded with a resounding “no.”⁷⁷

Gillfield was especially vigilant about keeping peace among members. Sally Vaughn and Franky Tucker were removed from fellowship in 1818 for “quarreling and spitting in each others face.”⁷⁸ In 1824, a dispute erupted between exhorter Daniel Scott and preacher Peter Valentine after Scott asked Valentine to move to the back of the church while local white Methodists used the building. Perhaps Valentine felt insulted at being asked to defer to whites—or to Methodists; in any event, he told Scott that “it was god’s mercy that he [Valentine] did not strike him.” After Valentine gave “satisfaction”—probably an apology—for his conduct, he was retained in the church.⁷⁹ Other conflicts proved more volatile. Eve, an enslaved woman, charged another slave named Mary with trying to poison her. Church leaders determined that Eve had wrongly accused Mary and expelled her for making the accusation.⁸⁰ In 1825, after someone wondered why Abby Webster was “dressing herself in men’s clothes and walking the streets by night,” the leadership expelled her for “threatening vengeance against a

⁷⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 19, 1817.

⁷⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 6, 1819.

⁷⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 9, 1818.

⁷⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 3 and 11, 1824.

⁸⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 3 and 4, 1824.

woman.” Webster was apparently donning a disguise to stalk her enemy after dark. She repented of her actions and was readmitted to the church a year later.⁸¹

Domestic disputes came before church courts as well. At a meeting in 1820, preacher Jacob Howell asked whether it was right for a member to beat his wife; the leaders asserted that spousal abuse was immoral.⁸² In 1825, a preacher named John White confessed that he had been “tempted to strike his wife which conduct he [did] not approve in himself.” The church suspended White from communion and temporarily removed his preaching rights. His wife Sarah, however, also faced a suspension for “not being silent when bid by her husband.”⁸³ At the same meeting, the church suspended preacher Valentine, for hitting his wife.⁸⁴ When James Brown told the church that he had been “obligated to strike or fight his wife” in 1827, the congregation did not hesitate to exclude him.⁸⁵

Placing a high value on the marital vows of free blacks and slaves alike, Gillfield regularly intervened in cases of adultery. Black leaders attempted to standardize the church’s marriage practices in 1819 and allowed members a kind of grace period in which to “marry according to law” after which unlawful couples would be excluded. Presumably, the leaders wanted all couples, enslaved and free, to register their marriages with the church, even though the marriages of enslaved people were not validated by the civil law. A few months later, Eliza Colston and James Alexander were expelled for trying to marry even though Eliza allegedly already had a husband.⁸⁶ Yet certain

⁸¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 1 and 2, 1825; May 6, 1826.

⁸² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 2, 1820.

⁸³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 17 and Aug. 6, 1825.

⁸⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 6, 1825.

⁸⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 6, 1827.

⁸⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, May 13, Aug. 4, 1819.

members claimed that Eliza (it is unclear whether she was enslaved or free) actually had never been married before, and three black leaders went to ask the white Voinard family—either her owners or her employers—if they knew anything about it. When the Voinards stated that their maid Eliza’s alleged first husband had never “asked for” Eliza “to make a wife of her,” the church readmitted Eliza and James Alexander, now as husband and wife.⁸⁷ In 1822, church leaders adopted another rule requiring couples to obtain a “certificate” to “make their marriage lawful with the Church.” Gillfield’s preachers were authorized to perform marriages for those with certificates.⁸⁸ Although the civil laws did not recognize slave marriages, churches like Gillfield upheld these unions and made efforts to formalize them.

While Gillfield defended slave members’ right to marry, other aspects of church discipline supported the authority of slaveholders and the civil government. At a meeting in 1819, for instance, Billy and Crity were expelled for running away from their masters.⁸⁹ After hearing a “complaint” that enslaved member Alick had fled his mistress, the congregation expelled him in 1822. In the very next vote, however, the congregation appeared to sympathize with Betty Hunt, “the supposed property of Mr. Hide,” who was also accused of running away. Believing that Hunt was “intitled [sic] to her freedom and that it was in pursuit of that rights [sic] she went away,” the church did not exclude her from fellowship. Apparently Hunt claimed she had been manumitted, and her master denied it. Since the law had apparently already “handled” this case—the church records do not specify what this meant—the congregation decided to “have nothing to do with

⁸⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 2 and 16, Jun. 2, 1822.

⁸⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 3, 1822.

⁸⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, May 13, 1819.

it.”⁹⁰ Hunt’s case suggests two important points about Gillfield’s posture toward slavery and the civil law. Members of the church were willing to accept a black woman’s word and acknowledge her right to freedom; on the other hand, the church also accepted the jurisdiction of the civil courts in the matter.

Several years later, Gillfield again demonstrated its commitment to respect civil law when James Brown was charged with “disobeying the orders of the Mayor of the town.”⁹¹ Members were expelled for other illegal activities as well, such as James Dyon for the “sin of purloining his master’s goods.”⁹² When the church excluded Rachel Reed for “being shut up in a room with a white man” in 1823, it evinced a willingness to uphold both sexual morality along with the racial mores of society in general, as the mention of the man’s race suggests.⁹³

If a member faced a disciplinary expulsion, he or she no longer held a place in a congregation’s spiritual fellowship. In fact, Gillfield’s leaders ruled in 1816 that to continue calling such a person “brother” or “sister” would be a “disorderly,” and thus punishable, offense in itself.⁹⁴ Gillfield joined biracial congregations in its reverence for these fraternal titles and its punctiliousness in their use. Mill Swamp Baptist, for instance, passed a similar resolution in 1810, declaring the misuse of the terms a violation of “gospel order.”⁹⁵ Spiritual labels transcended racial boundaries throughout the antebellum period. Members of Gillfield used these exclusive titles with one another as well as with visiting white Baptists such as “Brother” Pittman.

⁹⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. [no date given] 1822.

⁹¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 5, 1831.

⁹² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 31, 1823.

⁹³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 28, 1823.

⁹⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 18, 1816.

⁹⁵ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 31, 1810.

Cross-racial cooperation suffered in the late 1820s when the Portsmouth Association attempted to restrict Gillfield's independence by recommending that it unite with the Market Street Church and submit to white leadership. The association also informed Gillfield that it could no longer send its own representatives to the annual meetings, and, as with Petersburg African, a white delegate from Market Street would now need to represent the black congregation. Loath to relinquish its own sovereignty, Gillfield instead proposed a compromise: the church would not consolidate with Market Street, but it would consent to white representation. Portsmouth agreed and retained Gillfield as a member.⁹⁶ This exchange aptly illustrates the push-and-pull dynamic of white supervision and black autonomy that characterized southern evangelicalism in the nineteenth century.

Independent black churches generally emerged in urban areas, but rural blacks might choose to congregate at a local meeting house instead of making the trek into town. During Gillfield's early days, in 1810, a group separated to form the Elam Baptist Church under the leadership of Abraham Brown.⁹⁷ Located in rural Charles City County, this congregation applied in 1813 for membership in the Dover Association, which found the church's "faith and practice" to be "orderly" and admitted it to membership. The association then appointed two white elders of neighboring churches to "set in order things that may be wanting."⁹⁸ Dover continued to send white elders to Elam during the next few years, but biracial churches like James City and Petsworth also received aid

⁹⁶ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1828*, 5; *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1829*, 6.

⁹⁷ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 292. An Elam Church history and the Dover Association minutes recorded Brown's name both as "Abraham" and "Abram."

⁹⁸ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1813*, 5.

from visiting elders during these years.⁹⁹ Dover regularly sent delegates to churches that lacked ordained elders, and, according to church records, one of those visiting white elders, William Clopton, began to serve as pastor of Elam at some point before 1820.¹⁰⁰ One white pastor or another would minister to Elam throughout the antebellum years, but the degree of those persons' involvement and influence there was probably minor, since black deacons oversaw most of the affairs of the church.

The small population of Elam Baptist consisted largely of free blacks, and its leadership was almost entirely free. Black delegates, such as Abraham Brown, Henry C. Harris, James Brown, and Pleasant Smith, attended the annual meetings of the Dover Association in the 1810s and 1820s. Since, unlike Portsmouth, Dover permitted black delegates to attend association meetings throughout the antebellum period, other prominent members of Elam would take the place of these men in later years.¹⁰¹ Several members of Abraham Brown's family, along with Henry C. Harris, served as trustees for the church when Abraham and Susanna deeded a portion of their land to the congregation in 1818.¹⁰² According to a church history, James Brown was a well-known craftsman and preacher in the region who would "work hard all day and go ten miles to preach at night."¹⁰³ Pleasant Smith had served as a deacon at the biracial Emmaus Baptist Church for several years before he obtained a letter of dismissal to attend Elam in 1818. A

⁹⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1814*, 8; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1815*, 7; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1816*, 6; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1817*, 5-6; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1819*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ *History of Elam Baptist Church*, 17; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1819*, 7.

¹⁰¹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association*, years 1813-1830. By 1830, the membership of Elam Baptist had reached seventy-two. *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1830*, 1.

¹⁰² Charles City County Land Records, Deed Book 6, 1816-1824, 214-15; *History of Elam Baptist Church*, 11.

¹⁰³ *History of Elam Baptist Church*, 19-20.

number of black deacons left Emmaus after Elam was established, but some chose to remain united with the biracial church.¹⁰⁴

In its early years, Elam sought Emmaus's assistance in organizing its government. Abraham Brown and his brother John met with white leaders in 1812 to "advise with [Emmaus] respecting there [sic] Constitution."¹⁰⁵ Emmaus invited black deacons from Elam to attend church meetings over the next few years, and the Browns often joined these gatherings.¹⁰⁶ As Elam became more organized and the white minister William Clopton started pastoring the church, ties with Emmaus seem to have diminished. Yet black deacons continued to lead Elam's members and attend the biracial association meetings. Like other black Baptist churches in the area, Elam managed to maintain much of its independence due to the persistence and quality of its black leadership and to whites' inconsistent and often half-hearted attempts at supervising black congregations.

Most African American churches in the antebellum South developed either directly from all-black gatherings or as offshoots of interracial churches, but the First Baptist Church of Norfolk did not follow either pattern. Instead, whites at First Norfolk separated to form their own congregation, leaving the parent church in the hands of the black members. The Norfolk church had originated as a branch of the biracial Portsmouth Baptist Church, where Jacob Bishop, a free black preacher from Northampton County, had served as pastor to both blacks and whites during the late

¹⁰⁴ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, 1792-1841, years 1817-1825, VBHS.

¹⁰⁵ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1812.

¹⁰⁶ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb., May, Sept., Oct. and Nov. 1813; Aug. 1814; Aug., Sept. 1815.

1790s.¹⁰⁷ Wanting to avoid the taxing trip across the Elizabeth River, the Norfolk members, many of whom were black, began meeting closer to home in 1800.¹⁰⁸ Five years later, the Portsmouth Association incorporated the Norfolk church of 150 members as a separate congregation.¹⁰⁹

As the early church historian Semple noted, the people at Norfolk Baptist “had their full share of calamities.”¹¹⁰ Three of the church’s early white preachers, two from Europe and one from Hampton, made “no little confusion there” through what came to be regarded as false teaching and licentiousness. Around 1806, one of the church’s white elders, an Englishman named James Mitchell, took over as pastor.¹¹¹ Controversy would surround Mitchell later in life, but the Portsmouth Association seemed to hold him in high regard during Norfolk’s early years.

Around 1816, some “difficulties” surfaced between the white and black members at Norfolk, and twenty-five whites left the congregation to form the Cumberland Street Baptist Church. Although contemporary records do not indicate exactly what these “difficulties” entailed, the distinct racial divide is telling. Historian Luther Jackson

¹⁰⁷ Lemuel Burkitt and Jesse Read, *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association, From its original rise to the present time* (Halifax, N.C.: A. Hodge, 1803), 256-62; Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 456-59. Burkitt and Read described Bishop’s preaching as “much admired by both saints and sinners, for sometime, wherever he went.” Burkitt and Read, *Concise History*, 259.

¹⁰⁸ *A Documented History of the First Baptist Church Bute Street, Norfolk, Virginia 1800-1988*, ed. History and Archives Committee, Margaret L. Gordon, chairman (Virginia Beach: Hill’s Printing Co., Inc., 1988), 1. See also *1800-1950, Norfolk’s Most Unusual Church, Sesquicentennial Jubilee*, church history program (Norfolk: First Baptist Church, 1950); Robert G. Murray et al., eds., *The Historic First Baptist Church, Celebrating Two Hundred Years of Christ-Centered Ministries to the Community, 1800-2000* (Acton, MA: Tapestry Press, 2000); Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 296; Cassandra L. Newby, “‘The World Was All Before Them’: A Study of the Black Community in Norfolk, Virginia, 1861-1884” (Ph.D. diss., The College of William and Mary, 1992), 292-98. Burkitt and Semple do not give an exact date for the formation of the Norfolk church, but the above church histories, as well as Sobel and Newby, record it as 1800, citing the church’s constitution, Archives, First Baptist Church, Norfolk.

¹⁰⁹ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1805*, 4.

¹¹⁰ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 456.

¹¹¹ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 456-57; Burkitt and Read, *Concise History*, 257-62; Jackson, “Religious Development,” 194; *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 2.

suggests that James Mitchell's apparent antislavery leanings and fraternization with black members, along with accusations of "questionable character," led the whites to withdraw; Jackson bases his account on a "paper written by the son of a member who lived in Mitchell's time."¹¹² Since the Portsmouth Association would cite Mitchell for moral charges in later years, it may be that he faced local opposition during the early period as well. Whatever obstacles Mitchell may have confronted, however, he agreed to remain as pastor of the more than 250 black members at First Baptist.¹¹³

As at Elam, black leaders at Norfolk exercised significant authority in the church, perhaps because the presence of a white pastor, however questionable his character in some minds, assuaged the apprehensions of whites in the community and the Portsmouth Association. In 1830, ten free black members purchased a plot of land for a new church building on Bute Street for \$250. In contrast to the deeds signed by free blacks at Elam and Gillfield in 1818, however, five white men, including James Mitchell, served as sole trustees for the Bute Street property. Considering the rumors that circulated around this church and its supposedly antislavery pastor, city officials may have required the appointment of a group of white trustees—or perhaps the congregation thought a white board would offer protection and therefore recruited whites for the job.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Jackson, "Religious Development," 194 fn 17; Tommy L. Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 144-45. Sobel explains the racial divide at Norfolk simply as an example of how southern whites "increasingly preferred to separate themselves from blacks." Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 201.

¹¹³ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1816*, 3; *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1817*, 3, 5; *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1818*, 3-4; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 201, 297; *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 2; Cumberland Street was admitted to the Portsmouth Baptist Association in 1818.

¹¹⁴ Free blacks Aaron Rogers, Samuel Lewis, Moses Jordan, Randall Dillard, Peter Pointer, William Cooper, James Bly, David Carey, Thomas Knight, and Thomas Ruffin purchased the property, and whites Peter Lugg, James Mitchell, Elkanah Balance, Timothy Mason, and John Riggins acted as trustees; all are listed on the deed of Mar. 29, 1830. Norfolk City Land Records, Hustings Court, Deed Book 19, 1828-1831, 270-71, microfilm reel 8, LVA; Jackson, "Religious Development," 193.

The growing tension between autonomy and white control in Virginia's black churches erupted after Nat Turner's bloody uprising of August 1831. In the months following the rebellion, certain black churches temporarily closed or at least stopped sending reports to the regional associations, and many state officials and local whites viewed black religious leaders with suspicion or even outright hostility. In March of 1832, the Virginia legislature stripped blacks of their rights to preach and to assemble without whites to supervise.¹¹⁵ Yet the panic among whites eventually eased; a quotidian mentality resumed, black Baptists again asserted leadership roles in their churches, new black congregations emerged, and the interplay between independence and supervision began again. As Mechal Sobel aptly puts it, a "sub-rosa autonomy" characterized the government of southern black churches during the post-Turner period.¹¹⁶

In Williamsburg, the African Church faced several trials in the months and years after the rebellion. When the Dover Association held its annual meeting in October 1831, Williamsburg African did not send any representatives or communication. Perhaps local whites had interrupted the church's operations, or the members themselves may have chosen not to congregate because of the tense racial climate. The association appointed a white delegate to visit the church and report its "state and condition" at the next meeting.¹¹⁷ At the time, Dover was also considering the membership application of the interracial Zion Church in Williamsburg, which had organized in the late 1820s. The delegates voted to postpone Zion's admission to "give an opportunity for

¹¹⁵ Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:1 and 2, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Two* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 20-22.

¹¹⁶ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 208.

¹¹⁷ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1831*, 1-3, 5.

reconciliation.”¹¹⁸ What they meant by “reconciliation” is unclear, but perhaps a conflict had ensued between the temporarily disbanded African Church and the mostly white Zion Church, which first gathered in the town’s former gunpowder magazine, a few blocks from the African meeting house. Perhaps more likely, the term could have alluded to tensions between whites and blacks within the Zion congregation itself or even in the region at large. The association probably would have hesitated to incorporate any mixed-race congregation in the weeks after the revolt.¹¹⁹

At its next annual meeting in 1832, the Dover Association expressed its concern for the congregation of blacks in Williamsburg: “This body has experienced much affliction the past year. Their Meeting House having been closed in consequence of the insurrection at Southampton. No additions reported but 60 or 70 waiting candidates for baptism.”¹²⁰ This apparently sympathetic statement indicates that although the meeting house was closed—probably by local authorities—the congregation remained intact and retained the trust of at least some white Baptists. Thus, historians such as Luther Jackson and Albert Raboteau, who state that the Williamsburg church was closed, present only part of the story.¹²¹ Although Raboteau does add that, “despite harassment and legal restriction, there were black churches and black preachers who managed now and then to successfully evade limits to their autonomy,” he did not include the Williamsburg African Church among these.¹²²

¹¹⁸ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1831*, 4.

¹¹⁹ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 148. The revised edition of 1894, edited by G. W. Beale, included a footnote stating that the Zion Church was organized in 1828 and met in the “famous *Old Powder Magazine* in the public square in Williamsburg.”

¹²⁰ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1832*, 19-20.

¹²¹ Jackson, “Religious Development,” 205; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 178, 196-97.

¹²² Raboteau, 178-79.

The Dover Association voted to receive the interracial Zion Baptist into membership in 1832, and appointed its pastor, Scervant Jones, along with two others, to take “supervisory care” of the Williamsburg African congregation.¹²³ The black church retained independence in other ways, however. Free black delegates John Alvis, Henry Smith, and James Wallace made the trip to the Dover meeting that year to represent their church. Dover welcomed them despite the fact that the church had been “closed” and despite the increasing involvement of whites in their congregation.¹²⁴ John Alvis would return the following year, along with two other free black leaders.¹²⁵

These delegates, like those from other bodies, informed the association of recent developments in their church. At their “request,” three white elders were appointed to “superintend [the church’s] concerns.”¹²⁶ The black delegates also reported that, since the church had been “permitted to meet together,” it had “determined to keep none in fellowship who do not honor Christ, and walk as Christians,” and that many members had been excluded.¹²⁷ These reports reveal much about the post-Turner interactions of black and white Baptists. First, the black leaders probably requested the assistance of white elders since, according to the recent state laws, they themselves could no longer serve as pastors or preach before their church. No doubt they also knew that whites’ involvement would serve to quell any lingering local resistance to their fellowship. Because the delegates presented these messages soon after being “permitted to meet together,” the

¹²³ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1832*, 5.

¹²⁴ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1832*, 1-3. For John Alvis, see U.S. Federal Census of 1830, York County, and Free Black Register, York County, Oct. 15, 1804, Nov. 20, 1810, Oct. 20, 1817, and Mar. 17, 1828.

¹²⁵ Benjamin White and Jeffrey Barrett accompanied John Alvis to the association meeting in 1833. *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1833*, 4. For Benjamin White, see U.S. Federal Census of 1820, James City County; for Jeffrey Barrett, see U.S. Federal Census of 1840, York County.

¹²⁶ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1833*, 9.

¹²⁷ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1833*, 13.

black congregation was probably attempting to present a positive image, defending its right to remain part of the Dover Association amid racial hostility in the region.

Williamsburg's messages to Dover also reveal that the church building reopened in 1833. The correspondence of John Dipper, the former free black pastor, confirms this point. Dipper had emigrated to New York City, and then to Red Bank, New Jersey, after the insurrection, probably fearing that pending legislation would restrict his freedom.¹²⁸ Black leader Richard Vaughan of Richmond's First Baptist Church had even composed a letter of recommendation for Dipper as a "man of respectful caricter," which Dipper could have presented when joining or attempting to preach at a Baptist church in the North.¹²⁹ Another friend, John Andrews, wrote to Dipper from Williamsburg in the spring of 1833, sharing the interesting news that "I saw your old Meeting House opened on Sunday last and it reminded me of you."¹³⁰ Apparently, local authorities had allowed the African American congregation to return to its building no more than one year after the state restrictions of 1832 had passed the legislature, offering an interesting counterexample to what historian Herbert Aptheker describes as a "reign of terror" in southeastern Virginia in the wake of the rebellion.¹³¹ If Williamsburg authorities permitted blacks to regain their church building, and if the white-led Baptist association supported the black congregation's attempts to meet, the laws were probably not followed very strictly.

¹²⁸ Richard T. Booker to John Dipper, May 29, 1832; Rice Hadsill to John Dipper, Apr. 8, 1833, in John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 2, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library.

¹²⁹ Richard Vaughan to Henry Simmons, Mar. 2, 1832, in John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 2, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library. For more on Richard Vaughan, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp. 75-76, as well as this chapter, pp. 190, 208, and 222-23. For more on Dipper's life after he left Virginia, see Lane and Freeman, "John Dipper," 502-14.

¹³⁰ John Andrews to John Dipper, May 8, 1833, in John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 2, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library. Andrews's race is not known.

¹³¹ Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 57.

Dipper remained in contact with friends in Virginia, some of them white. Hoping to visit Virginia safely in 1835, he asked lawyer Robert Saunders (who later would serve as mayor of Williamsburg) to research the state laws and tell him whether a visit south would be wise.¹³² After an “examination” of the laws, Saunders advised Dipper not to make the journey. On the surface, it appears that Saunders’s reply demonstrates the harshness of the legislation. What is interesting, however, is that this lawyer had to *research* the laws in order to answer Dipper’s query, indicating that they may not have been widely enforced.

Neither the state legislation of 1832 nor Dipper’s relocation in a northern state undermined the respect between Dipper and certain whites in the Williamsburg area. Likewise, the relationship between the African Baptist Church and the Dover Association remained intact throughout the 1830s. In 1834, the association minutes recorded that Moses Moore, a free black landowner of James City County, attended as a delegate from the African church. Moore again represented Williamsburg at the association meetings in 1837 and 1838. Historian Mechal Sobel asserts that this man was probably the same Moses Moore who would reappear at the association in 1859 as a black preacher from the Chickahominy Church in James City County.¹³³

Many black delegates to association meetings during this period, such as Moore and Benjamin White, had almost certainly preached in the African church before the insurrection, and it seems likely that black preaching continued despite the prohibition.¹³⁴

¹³² Robert Saunders, Jr., to John Dipper, Mar. 27, 1835, in John Dipper Papers, Manuscript Group 1127, Series 2, NJHS; also available in the Rockefeller Library. For evidence of Saunders’s mayoral office, see the *Virginia Gazette*, Sept. 13, 1855.

¹³³ Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 307. For Moses Moore, see U.S. Federal Census of 1840 and 1850, James City County.

¹³⁴ As long-term delegates to the Dover Association, Moses Moore and Benjamin White were most likely active preachers, as was delegate Gowan Pamphlet before them. White was obviously in a position

Although the law required a white pastor's presence at all black religious meetings, the Dover minutes do not indicate that a white pastor was specifically assigned to the Williamsburg church in the 1830s. Only after the church reorganized in the early 1840s was white pastor Scervant Jones ordered to oversee the black congregation. If Jones's appointment was considered important enough to record, then presumably any assignment of a white pastor to the black Williamsburg church in the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion would have been deemed worthy of mention in the record. Here too, then, the white and black members of the Dover Association paid only cursory attention to the new laws.

Indeed, the first mention of the legislation of 1832 does not occur in the Dover minutes until 1834, when the delegates recommended that churches "take into consideration the propriety of adopting, in conformity with the provisions of the law... a more systematic course of oral religious instruction for the benefit of coloured persons."¹³⁵ The association made no mention of excluding all-black congregations or forbidding black delegates from attending the annual meetings. This statement may have been directed primarily toward white pastors who had blacks in their congregations—many of the churches in the association contained black majorities—or toward slaveholders. The resolution did not single out, or even mention, the association's two independent black churches, Williamsburg and Elam.

The Williamsburg African Church in the 1830s experienced a series of hardships unrelated to the recent legislation. In June 1834, a tornado hit the town and, according to a Norfolk newspaper "many chimnies [sic] and frame houses were blown down, among

of strong leadership considering that he was the delegate who recommended preacher John Dipper to the Dover Association in 1829 (see page 129, above).

¹³⁵ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1834*, 8.

which the colored people's meeting house near the Lunatic Hospital." Even the author of this article, who referred to the church only in passing, identified the meeting house as belonging to "the colored people," an indication of the church's autonomy only two years after the state had restricted black religious assembly.¹³⁶

During the next several years, the Williamsburg African congregation suffered much unrest. The nature of the church's difficulty is unclear, but it was likely unrelated to the laws, as they had had no effect on the church's standing in the early 1830s. The association appointed groups of delegates from neighboring churches to visit the congregation and report its condition. According to the association, the turmoil proved irresolvable, and, "after much thought and deliberation," it advised the members to "dissolve and unite themselves to other churches in their respective bounds" in 1839.¹³⁷ In the words of a contemporary Baptist newspaper, the church had become "disorderly," resulting in its exclusion from the association.¹³⁸ Whether the congregation had actually strayed from Baptist standards or white delegates simply perceived the black church's autonomy in and of itself as "disorderly," this disciplinary measure seems more the outcome of general spiritual oversight than a wholehearted implementation of the state laws, which had been on the books for seven years at this point.

The interracial Zion Baptist Church was now the only authorized Baptist church in Williamsburg, with a membership of 248 in 1839. Zion's population did not increase dramatically during the next couple of years, suggesting that most members of the dissolved African church either continued to meet without the association's approval or

¹³⁶ *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*, Jun. 23, 1834.

¹³⁷ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1839*, 6.

¹³⁸ *Religious Herald*, Oct. 12, 1843.

did not meet at all.¹³⁹ Some blacks even approached the local Episcopal minister, Rev. William Hodges of Bruton Parish, for baptism rather than turn to Zion church, having apparently declined to become members of Zion. According to Scervant Jones, Hodges agreed to immerse a number of blacks “as Baptists.”¹⁴⁰ Perhaps these converts chose to attend Bruton Parish following their immersion or, as declared Baptists, worshipped independently.

Williamsburg African survived despite its intramural turmoil and its exclusion from the regional body. In 1843, it reentered the association, which trusted that the church would again “send forth a healthy influence.”¹⁴¹ Scervant Jones now pastored the congregation, and white delegates represented the church at the association meetings. Thus the church lost much of its independence in the 1840s, rather than in the early 1830s. White Baptists took control of this black congregation not in a panicked response to Nat Turner’s uprising, but apparently out of an increasingly widespread paternalistic desire to systematically oversee black Christians.

The status of those whom the Episcopal priest William Hodges had baptized now became a subject of debate. Dover had declared in 1841 that the baptisms of a “Pedo-Baptist” minister, or one who practiced infant baptism, were invalid.¹⁴² Unsure of how to treat those in “a great strait between confirmation and re-immersion”—in essence a spiritual limbo—Scervant Jones corresponded with Baptist pastor L. W. Allen, and the *Religious Herald*, a Virginia Baptist newspaper, published their letters. Allen insisted that these blacks receive baptism from a regular Baptist minister before becoming

¹³⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association, years 1839-1842.*

¹⁴⁰ *Religious Herald*, Aug. 8, 1844, cited in Rowe, “Biographical Sketch of Gowan Pamphlet,” fn 21.

¹⁴¹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1843*, 14.

¹⁴² *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1841*, 8.

members.¹⁴³ Jones apparently disagreed with Allen; at the Dover meeting in 1844, he held that these people were already legitimate members, even though most of the delegates voted otherwise.¹⁴⁴

Jones's letter to Allen reveals more than a theological controversy. Jones expressed sympathy for the congregation, whose "house of worship was now forcibly withheld from them" despite its "having long been theirs by deed." He did not indicate who had seized the meeting house, but perhaps local officials did not want the church to reopen after its reacceptance into the Dover Association, particularly considering that the congregation had been deemed "disorderly" at one time. Yet Jones remained confident that the "moral sense of this intelligent community" would win out, asserting that the "good citizens of this ancient metropolis will not suffer the poor colored Baptists to have their house of worship forcibly taken from them."¹⁴⁵ Divisions clearly existed among whites in the neighborhood concerning corporate activity by black evangelicals; accounts of tensions between black and white Baptists during the post-Turner period, and of white solidarity in opposing black religious activity, have been exaggerated.¹⁴⁶ While still advocating some degree of racial supervision, people like Scervant Jones seemed willing to accept the integrity and autonomy of the black evangelical community. The black

¹⁴³ *Religious Herald*, Aug. 8 and Oct. 3, 1844.

¹⁴⁴ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1844*, 8.

¹⁴⁵ *Religious Herald*, Jul. 29, 1844.

¹⁴⁶ See also Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 185-90; Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 285-86, 291; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 137-38, 177, 204; Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 33; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 325; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 212; Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner's Virginia*, 197-98, 221-32; Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 140-58.

Baptists did apparently regain control of their building, for they continued to gather there until they constructed a more permanent meeting house nearby a decade later.¹⁴⁷

After weathering the conflicts of the 1840s, the church reported a “most delightful harmony” in 1849. The association hoped the Williamsburg congregation could “now go on to success.”¹⁴⁸ After Scervant Jones’s death in 1854, a series of white elders from Zion and the Dover Association ministered to the church. Yet blacks were also meeting alone at night in the area “with the apparent purpose of singing, prayer, &c.,” and concerned whites published a warning to city officials in the *Virginia Gazette*.¹⁴⁹ Seeking to discourage blacks from gathering at night, whites in Williamsburg supported the new meeting house for the African church. The building’s dedication was a community-wide event, as whites and blacks crowded into the new sanctuary, albeit in segregated seats. Among the speakers at the event was black preacher William Taylor of Hampton Baptist Church, and despite the legislation that banned black preaching, the newspaper account identified him as such.¹⁵⁰ At a later date, Taylor actually filled in for white elder William Crandall in leading one of most well-attended services at Williamsburg African.¹⁵¹

Whites were often present to oversee the services at Williamsburg African, but black leaders still did much to shepherd the congregation. One anonymous white visitor described Sunday gatherings at the church in the *Gazette*, noting that black preachers James Wallis, John Smith, “or some other clerical gentleman of color” gave exhortations to the “attentive congregation.” Obviously sympathetic to black religious activity, this

¹⁴⁷ Patricia Samford, “First Baptist Church Archaeological Report.” The new meeting house was constructed at the corner of Nassau and Francis Streets in 1855.

¹⁴⁸ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1849*, 23.

¹⁴⁹ For an account of Scervant Jones’s death, see the *Virginia Gazette*, May 4, 1854, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 17-18. For the citizens’ warning, see “Word to Our City Fathers!” in the *Virginia Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1854, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 18.

¹⁵⁰ *Williamsburg Virginia Gazette*, May 15, 1856, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 19.

¹⁵¹ *Williamsburg Weekly Gazette*, May 26, 1858, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 21.

observer applauded these preachers for presenting the “purity and simplicity” of the gospel. Most of all, the writer described the congregation’s worship as “singing worthy of the name—not that studied, stiff, half suppressed, hypocritical whining of fashionable white congregations, but...singing in the spirit, and the *understanding* thrown in.”¹⁵² As further evidence of at least some whites’ acceptance of the autonomy of the African church, the *Gazette* published a laudatory obituary for black preacher Wallis in 1860, noting that he was “beloved by all who knew him” and marked by a “good mind...to a considerable extent liberally cultivated.” The newspaper identified him as a “minister of the Gospel for forty years.”¹⁵³ Men like James Wallis helped Williamsburg African to maintain much of its sovereignty in the antebellum years, foreshadowing the full independence that the congregation would assert after the Civil War.

The black congregation at Elam saw few changes during the post-Turner years. A little over a month after the rebellion, the Dover Association commended the addition of twenty-three members to this church, noting that “the brethren and sisters” at Elam seemed “very much engaged.”¹⁵⁴ Elam’s reports did not allude to the Turner crisis until 1832, when Dover recorded that this church “composed of colored persons necessarily labors under considerable restraints” and required the assistance of “white ministering brethren,” even though white pastor James Clopton had been serving there for years. Yet once again, the association was pleased to note a “large accession” of seventy-seven new members at Elam that year.¹⁵⁵ Worship and business meetings seem to have continued as

¹⁵² *Williamsburg Weekly Gazette*, Jan. 13, 1858, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 21.

¹⁵³ *Weekly Gazette and Eastern Virginia Advertiser*, Aug. 8, 1860, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 22.

¹⁵⁴ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1831*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1832*, 16-17.

usual at this small church. In 1833, the Dover minutes described the congregation as “united and prosperous.”¹⁵⁶ Free black leaders James and Christopher Brown represented the church at these meetings. Black delegates from Elam, many of them members of the Brown family, made the journey to Dover’s annual meetings almost every year until the Civil War, and white delegates welcomed them there.

Blacks may have continued preaching at Elam as well, even after the state’s subsequent restrictions of 1848, which defined an “unlawful assembly” as one of “slaves, free Negroes or mulattoes for the purpose of religious worship when such worship is conducted by a slave, free Negro, or mulatto”; this legislation effectively reiterated the law of 1832.¹⁵⁷ According to oral accounts passed through generations of Elam blacks, however, Elam’s white pastor during the 1850s, James H. Christian, hardly participated in the church services at all. He merely attended and “sat in the most comfortable seat to be had, listened to sermons by some of the colored brothers, drew his one dollar for attendance, enjoyed a good dinner such as colored people can cook, and quietly sauntered back to his feudal home.”¹⁵⁸ This casual narrative demonstrates the apathetic response of at least some white Baptists to state legislation restricting black activity. In the late 1850s, when the Dover Association began recording the number of preaching days per month at each of the churches, Elam apparently only had preaching on the fourth

¹⁵⁶ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1833*, 10.

¹⁵⁷ Acts of the General Assembly, 1848, Chap. 120 (Criminal Code), Chap. X:39 and 40, *Acts of the General Assembly...1848* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1848), 120; Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:1 and 2, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...*, 20-22. A significant difference between the laws of 1832 and 1848, however, was that, in 1832, slaves were allowed to attend night meetings conducted by whites when granted permission from their owners, but in 1848, “every such assemblage in the night time under whatsoever pretext” was banned; see Chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp. 246-47.

¹⁵⁸ *History of Elam Baptist Church*, 25. Although this oral history source is of questionable reliability, it still reveals a remarkable lack of attention to the state legislation. See Dover minutes for the first mention of J.H. Christian as pastor of Elam in 1850. William and James Clopton had served as pastors before Christian. *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1850*, 3.

Saturday. Either the congregation did not meet three weeks out of every month, or services took place without Pastor Christian's sermons or even his attendance. Almost every other congregation in the Dover Association had preaching services at least twice a month, and urban churches hosted preaching every Sunday.¹⁵⁹

Elam received less attention from the Dover Association than the other all-black churches in the region, perhaps because of its mostly free black membership—a circumstance that would contradict historian Ira Berlin's assertion that southern whites almost invariably regarded the free black as "an incorrigible subversive."¹⁶⁰ In 1841, a Dover clerk made a point of noting that Elam was "composed almost entirely of free people of color."¹⁶¹ Unlike its supervision of Williamsburg African, which resulted in that church's temporary suspension, the association seemed confident that Elam's white pastor would adequately oversee the congregation. According to a church history, at some point during the antebellum period a "great many" of the slaves were "taken" from Elam by their masters and forced to attend Old Mount Zion, a body established specifically for them.¹⁶² Sobel asserts that free black churches like Elam were "distinguished by both blacks and whites as very different from slave or mixed churches."¹⁶³ Southern white evangelicals directed a good deal of writing and resources toward mission work among slaves in the 1840s and 1850s; likewise, the Dover Association seemed to focus its supervisory efforts on congregations with large numbers

¹⁵⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1858*, 8-12; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1859*, 14-19; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 23-28.

¹⁶⁰ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 89.

¹⁶¹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1841*, 3-4.

¹⁶² *History of Elam Baptist Church*, 18; Jackson, "Religious Development," 205.

¹⁶³ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 134.

of slaves. In contrast, the state legislature grouped enslaved and free Afro-Virginian evangelicals together, depicting black Christians as a general threat to social order.

Black leaders such as James and Christopher Brown continued to play important roles in the government of Elam Baptist in the late antebellum period. The church remained an active member of the Dover Association, as shown by its repeated contributions to the association's general fund. In 1843, for instance, the deacons collected two dollars from the 228-member congregation to bring to the association. Zion Baptist in Williamsburg, a church of 204 whites and 215 blacks, contributed the same amount that year.¹⁶⁴ Elam's delegates would join those from other churches in bringing that amount, and sometimes more, year after year.¹⁶⁵ The rural fellowship at Elam aptly demonstrates the complexities of the evangelical South—a church under the charge of whites but directed by blacks; a congregation at odds with a sometimes paternalistic white Baptist leadership but willing to cooperate with, or even support, that leadership.

Virginia's urban centers served as busy gathering places for free blacks and slaves, particularly on Sunday mornings. The state's restrictions of the 1830s did little to stem the dramatic influx of blacks into African American churches in the region. In 1850, for example, the five black churches in the Portsmouth Association baptized 694 people, nearly 60 percent of all those baptized in the forty-four churches of the

¹⁶⁴ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1843*, 3-4.

¹⁶⁵ For detailed records of black churches' significant contributions to regional associational funds, see the statistical tables in the annual minutes, for instance *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1848*, 18-19; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1849*, 18-19. For examples of black churches' donations to the statewide General Association as well, see *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the General Association of Virginia... 1837*, 8, VBHS; *Proceedings... of the Baptist General Association... 1844*, 20-25, VBHS.

association that year. Indeed, black Baptists greatly outnumbered their white brethren in Virginia's cities throughout the late antebellum period.¹⁶⁶ With the largest concentration of free blacks in the state, the city of Petersburg provided significant opportunities for independent black church life.¹⁶⁷

In the years after the Turner crisis, the Petersburg African Church continued to expand despite difficulty in finding a regular white pastor. By 1833, the church of more than eight hundred members was the largest in the Portsmouth Association.¹⁶⁸ Portsmouth "recommended" that the church "procure, as soon as possible, some suitable white minister to act as their pastor" and to seek the assistance of whites at the Market Street Baptist Church.¹⁶⁹ Despite white leaders' attempts to oversee the Petersburg African congregation, it is significant that the association merely "recommended" this step, rather than "require" or "order" it, indicating the persistence of the Baptist commitment to congregational sovereignty even in the midst of white Virginians' efforts to implement racial restrictions. While Market Street did aid the African church in "teaching, exhorting, and admonishing" its members during the next several years, the African church did not actually hire a regular white pastor until 1842, when elder Caleb Gordan agreed to serve both black churches in the city, Petersburg African and Gillfield.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1850*, 22-23; Jackson, "Religious Development," 233-34.

¹⁶⁷ Luther P. Jackson, "Free Negroes of Petersburg, Virginia," *Journal of Negro History* 12 (Jul. 1927), 366.

¹⁶⁸ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1833*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1834*, 8.

¹⁷⁰ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1835*, 10, *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1842*. See also *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association*, years 1836-1841.

Upon another “recommendation” of the Portsmouth Association, a third black church was constituted in Petersburg in 1843 with the assistance of Gordan and white elders from Market Street. Apparently some kind of conflict had erupted at Gillfield, and several members had left to unite with Market Street. These members then applied to the association to form a separate church and received the organization’s “right hand of fellowship” as Third African, or “Third Colored.”¹⁷¹ In the early 1850s, Petersburg (First) African and Third African were again in need of a white pastor. The Portsmouth Association sought the aid of the Board of the General Association, the statewide Baptist organization, to “supply the destitution” of several churches, biracial and all-black, that lacked pastors. Portsmouth selected white elder R.R. Overby to pastor the two black congregations and hoped that the Board could assist in paying his salary. When the Board refused for “want of funds,” Portsmouth made arrangements with the members of both churches to raise \$350 for the new minister’s annual salary.¹⁷² The following year the churches reported “extensive revivals” during which more than two hundred people were converted.¹⁷³

Overby’s tenure at the First and Third African Churches apparently ran out in 1856, and the Portsmouth Association “urged”—again, it did not “order”—the black churches to “secure competent white pastors as soon as practicable.”¹⁷⁴ While whites from Market Street continued to represent these churches at the association meetings, the Portsmouth minutes do not indicate whether the churches hired a regular white pastor. In

¹⁷¹ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1842*, 14; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1843*, 3-4, 8-11; *Religious Herald*, May 18, 1843, cited in Jackson, “Religious Development,” 223 fn 145; Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 302; Amina Luqman-Dawson, *African Americans of Petersburg* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 41.

¹⁷² *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1853*, 8.

¹⁷³ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1854*, 12-13.

¹⁷⁴ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1856*, 11-12.

any event, the congregations continued to thrive, and in 1860 alone, 427 new converts were baptized.¹⁷⁵ Free black preacher Daniel Jackson, long a leader at Petersburg African, was even performing some of the baptisms in the 1850s. A local newspaper described one of Jackson's baptismal ceremonies which a large crowd of black and white men and women gathered to witness.¹⁷⁶ In both 1850 and 1860, the Federal Censuses for Petersburg openly listed the elderly Jackson's occupation as "Baptist preacher," even though Virginia law still forbade blacks to hold that office.¹⁷⁷ The First African Church had prospered enough by 1860 to purchase a plot on Harrison Street for \$1,440, on which it would construct a church building after the Civil War.¹⁷⁸ The black churches' impressive growth in the years without a white pastor indicates both an enduring presence of black leadership in these congregations, as well as the inattentiveness, or even the active sympathy, of white Baptist leaders and city officials.

On Perry Street in Petersburg, near the homes of several prominent free black families, the doors of Gillfield Baptist Church opened to welcome hundreds of members each week in the years just preceding the Civil War.¹⁷⁹ With more than 1,500 members by 1854, Gillfield remained one of the largest bodies in the association.¹⁸⁰ As its membership boomed in the years after Nat Turner's Rebellion, Gillfield strove to maintain independence from white control. Following the passage of the repressive state laws of 1832, Gillfield's members appointed a white man, John D. Williams, to serve as

¹⁷⁵ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1860*, insert.

¹⁷⁶ *Daily Express*, Jun. 2, 1856, cited in Jackson, "Religious Development," 228.

¹⁷⁷ U.S. Federal Census of 1850, Petersburg; U.S. Federal Census of 1860, Petersburg South Ward.

¹⁷⁸ Petersburg Land Records, Hustings Court, Deed Book 26, 1860-1862, 756, microfilm reel 15, LVA, cited in Jackson, "Religious Development," 229.

¹⁷⁹ Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 152; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 205-08.

¹⁸⁰ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1854*, 24-25.

delegate and pastor in 1833.¹⁸¹ When Williams decided to move west in 1835, the church, in a letter to the association, lamented the “want of the preached word.”¹⁸² Gillfield was not the only church in need of adequate preaching; a number of interracial churches in the association also lacked regular ministers. Portsmouth thought it “impossible for much prosperity to attend a church thus situated.”¹⁸³ Yet the following year, Gillfield reported that it was “prospering” with many new converts and a “general spirit of kindness and love.”¹⁸⁴ Somehow the church managed to attract many new members without a minister, perhaps an indication that black leaders were still preaching to large audiences there.

As in the years before the Turner crisis, the church in its dealings with the association preserved some elements of autonomy while ceding others. After a couple of years without a pastor, the members decided to take matters into their own hands, resolving to “look out for a pastor of colour among her members.”¹⁸⁵ Clearly ignoring the state laws, they elected black member Sampson White to serve as pastor in 1837.¹⁸⁶

Not only did Gillfield’s members appoint their own black minister during this period; they also wrote to the association requesting permission to send their own

¹⁸¹ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1833*, 3; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1834*, 3; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, May 4, 1834, Gillfield Baptist Church Records, 1827-1939, Accession #10041, microfilm reel M-1397, Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia (hereafter UVA). This minute book is located after the 1827-1853 book on the microfilm reel. These minute books are somewhat disorganized, and the years are sometimes out of order. Each book contains different sets of years, so the records are not duplicated between books.

¹⁸² *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1835*, 6.

¹⁸³ *Minutes...of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1836*, 15.

¹⁸⁴ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1837*, 11.

¹⁸⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1853, Mar. 6, 1836, UVA.

¹⁸⁶ Kennard, *Short History of Gillfield Baptist Church*, 24. A gap exists from 1836 to 1842 in the minute books, but Kennard’s church history, as well as others, assert that White served as pastor in 1837. Kennard was actually baptized into the church in 1849; thus, while not exactly a contemporary of White’s, he would almost certainly have known this part of the church’s history well. See *Short History*, p. 18, for mention of Kennard’s baptism in 1849.

delegates to the annual meetings, instead of being represented by whites from Market Street.¹⁸⁷ Although Portsmouth unanimously rejected their plea, Gillfield's request indicates the persistent involvement of black leadership in day-to-day church affairs. In 1838, Portsmouth sent a delegation to help Gillfield secure a permanent pastor, probably seeking to curb the church's recent assertions of sovereignty, particularly the recent appointment of Sampson White.¹⁸⁸ White left the pulpit at Gillfield; in 1839 he accepted the position of pastor at a new black church in Washington, D.C.¹⁸⁹ It remains unclear whether White's departure from Gillfield occurred because of pressure from the civil government or the Baptist association, or merely for personal reasons.

Despite the regulations enacted by the General Assembly and white Baptist leaders, some whites in Petersburg were willing to defend black Christians' entitlement to certain freedoms. Early in 1839, 144 whites and blacks, including Mayor Daniel Lyon and free black leader Jacob Brander of Gillfield, petitioned the House of Delegates to permit "free Colored ministers to bury the dead, to marry, & to baptize persons of their own Color" in the daytime. The petition described how, under the existing laws, white ministers had to perform these services, often without compensation since many blacks were "extremely poor." Consequently, black people were sometimes unable to find white ministers willing to administer the ceremonies, which, the petition noted, were "important to all Christian communities."¹⁹⁰ These whites seem to have sympathized with the frustrations of their black neighbors as well as with the plight of the overburdened white

¹⁸⁷ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1838*, 6.

¹⁸⁸ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1838*, 6. See Michael Whitt's analysis of the connection between White's appointment and Gillfield's conflict with the Portsmouth Association in "Free Indeed! Trials and Triumphs of Enslaved and Freemen in Antebellum Virginia," *The Virginia Baptist Register* 50 (2011), 2841-45.

¹⁸⁹ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 206.

¹⁹⁰ Virginia General Assembly, legislative petitions to the General Assembly, Jan. 8, 1839, microfilm reel 218, Petersburg, 1836-1851, state government records collection, LVA.

ministers. Even though the mayor of Petersburg himself backed the cause, however, the state legislature refused to grant the citizens' request.¹⁹¹

While some whites challenged the state's racial code, others, including many delegates in the Portsmouth Association, believed it their duty "to be more conformed to the laws of [the] country." Convinced that black congregations required increased white supervision, and probably partially in response to Gillfield's election of a black pastor, Portsmouth passed a series of measures in May 1839 that tied the black churches of Petersburg and Norfolk more closely to neighboring white-led churches. The delegates resolved not to "hold any further connexion" with the African churches unless their pastors were members of the "nearest Baptist church of white persons." These regulations, the delegates asserted, would both "benefit the colored church" and "preserve the white denomination from reproach," and they recommended the rulings to the "special attention" of the people of Petersburg and Norfolk.¹⁹² The proceedings were published in local newspapers, such as the *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*.¹⁹³ According to the association, Gillfield would now operate essentially as an arm of the Market Street Church, rather than an autonomous body.

Yet once again, Gillfield's black deacons kept the church moving along an independent path. For two years after Portsmouth's resolutions, no one stepped forward to serve Gillfield as a regular white minister. Nevertheless, thirty-nine new converts joined the church and forty-two were excluded for immoral behavior during that

¹⁹¹ *Journals of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia...* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1839), Jan. 12, 1839, 25; Jan. 14, 1839, 28, LVA.

¹⁹² *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1839*, 13-14.

¹⁹³ *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*, Jul. 30, 1839, cited in Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 147.

period.¹⁹⁴ Black members were evidently holding church disciplinary meetings without a white pastor. Finally, in 1842, Caleb Gordan agreed to pastor the Gillfield congregation of more than eight hundred members as well as the First African Church, dividing his time between the two congregations.¹⁹⁵ Gillfield voted to pay him \$225 for his “half services.” Pleased that someone had filled these positions, Portsmouth praised an “extraordinary work of grace” within these churches, noting that a “revival had ensued” in which more than 150 people were baptized.¹⁹⁶ Gordan was obviously effective at winning converts; it is also possible that many of these people had been eagerly awaiting the opportunity to receive baptism from an ordained minister.

Some members at Gillfield apparently thought church leadership should reflect the social hierarchy, supporting Gordan as pastor and even opposing the appointment of enslaved fellow blacks to church offices. The controversy eventually reached the Portsmouth Association, where Gillfield’s delegate queried whether a slave was “eligible” to serve as a deacon in a “coloured church.” The Portsmouth Association had long agreed that slaves could serve as deacons in black churches and also as deacons with jurisdiction over black members in mixed-race congregations.¹⁹⁷ Thus certain blacks at Gillfield apparently wanted to allow only free members to hold positions of leadership,

¹⁹⁴ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1840*, 18; *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1841*, 17.

¹⁹⁵ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1842*, 11.

¹⁹⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, May 1 and 16, 1842; *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1842*, 15.

¹⁹⁷ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1842*, 13. In 1846, Gillfield recorded a list of its free and enslaved deacons. Free deacons: John White, Robert Holiway, James Easter, James Mabry, James Harris, W. Williams, John Cary, Tom Andson, Arthur Parham, Thomas McKenzie, William Jackson, Peters Valentine, Asberry Gilliam, Thomas Walker, James Carter, Albert Johnson. Enslaved deacons: Brancy Bright, Coy Quivers, David Smith, David Jones, Jones Michel, Henry Davis, Richard Clark, Pompy Pinister, Jesse Scott, David Mason, Daniel Henderson, Robin Wilcox, Sterling Harris, and Isaac Lewis. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 5, 1846, located after Dec. 2, 1849 record.

even as white Baptists were content to allow any black man to serve, provided he did so under the supervision of a white pastor.

Most members agreed, however, that Gillfield's forced subordination to the Market Street Church was unacceptable. In 1844, the two congregations clashed after Gillfield failed to comply with Portsmouth's resolutions of 1839.¹⁹⁸ Ultimately, Market Street refused to have "any fellowship" with Gillfield. A white minister, T.B. Creath, advised the black leaders to meet with Market Street, offering to "go down" with them "to fin [sic] out what was the matter" and "give any satisfaction on gospel grounds."¹⁹⁹ Acting as a liaison between the black and white congregations, Creath seemed to be seeking a balance between Gillfield's desire for sovereignty and Market Street's efforts at oversight, all the while hoping that fellowship would resume between the two bodies.

After expressing dissatisfaction with Market Street's role in supervising their church, the members of Gillfield were able to gain some ground with the association. Portsmouth agreed to "adjust matters" between the two churches, permitting Gillfield to appoint a committee of thirty male members to "act in concert" with a committee from Market Street to direct business and worship at Gillfield. Portsmouth also required the presence of either Gillfield's white pastor or a white member from Market Street at all of Gillfield's church meetings. Market Street held the final authority on all irresolvable conflicts with Gillfield. If Gillfield failed to comply, Market Street would withdraw her "aid and countenance"—which could have the effect of leaving Gillfield in defiance of state law. The Portsmouth Association concluded by pointing out that the black churches in the association had never been "entirely independent bodies" anyway and were instead

¹⁹⁸ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1844*, 11-12.

¹⁹⁹ *Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862*, Jan. 20, 1844.

branches of white churches.²⁰⁰ In one sense, Portsmouth's ruling reasserted existing restrictions on black religious autonomy. But the agreement to allow Gillfield to appoint a governing committee from its own body was new and embodied a concession to the demands of Gillfield's black leaders.

While white pastors held official authority at Gillfield, the black members checked that power from time to time. In October of 1857, the church voted not to renew white pastor Hosea Crowder's term for the following year.²⁰¹ A few months later, the church appointed black deacons Coy Quivers and Abram Robertson to "go to the Market St. Church and investigate" whether Gillfield could find a new minister.²⁰² According to Gillfield's minutes, Market Street refused to send a regular pastor, but instead simply informed the black church that if "any of their [Market Street's] Brethren choose to go and set with us [Gillfield], they could do so."²⁰³ Gillfield's leaders continued to appeal for a white pastor even as they asserted a prerogative to "hear" potential candidates to see whether they "suited" the church.²⁰⁴ In the summer of 1858, the church finally found a willing candidate in William Robinson, a white elder who had sometimes moderated Gillfield's meetings, and the congregation voted without a "desendant [sic] voice" to appoint him as pastor.²⁰⁵ Robinson evidently suited the church; when reelecting him in 1861, all the members "male & female" were "upon their feet" in a unanimous vote.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁰ *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1845*, 10; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Sept. 1, 1844.

²⁰¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Oct. 18, 1857.

²⁰² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jan. 3, 1858.

²⁰³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Mar. 7, 1858.

²⁰⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Apr. 18, 1858.

²⁰⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 4, Aug. 1, 1858. Robinson's name is also listed as "Robertson" in church minutes.

²⁰⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 7, 1861.

During Robinson's tenure, the black deacons continued to direct many of the church business and disciplinary meetings, and Robinson apparently supported them. A few weeks after his appointment, for instance, enslaved deacon Richard Clark led the meeting in prayer, and free black deacon Thomas McKenzie moderated.²⁰⁷ While the minutes listed Robinson's name at the bottom of the page, it is unclear whether he actually attended. Even if one counts instances in which Robinson's participation may have been marginal or pro forma, the record shows him moderating only about half of the church meetings.

Aside from officiating at baptismal, communion, and marriage ceremonies, the white pastor's main duty was to preach Sunday sermons. Yet white leaders were not the only ones preaching at Gillfield. In the 1840s and 1850s, the church's black leaders openly ignored state laws, authorizing numerous black men to exhort and preach with the full knowledge of white pastors and visiting elders. In 1846, free black deacon John Cary received a "letter of Recommendation to exercise in public" when the church found him qualified to be "useful as a minister."²⁰⁸ Slaves, such as deacon Pompy Peniston, were granted permission to speak before the church as well.²⁰⁹ The church leaders agreed in 1849 that slave deacon David Jones should not "preach Publick out of the church," implying that he *could* preach within the walls of the church.²¹⁰ The state laws of 1832 and 1848 explicitly forbade free blacks and slaves from leading other blacks in religious worship, whether in the open air or in a meeting house. Yet Gillfield authorized blacks to

²⁰⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Aug. 15, 1858. See also Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 184.

²⁰⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 22, 1846. See also Apr. 4, 1847, for free black deacon John White's authorization to exhort.

²⁰⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Dec. 6, 1846.

²¹⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 8, 1849.

perform this duty at various points, both in private and in public. In 1851, the congregation voted it “the duty of the Deacons” to “select from its Brethren such as in their opinion possess qualifications for Public Teaching.”²¹¹ Several months later, seven black men were “granted leave to speak in Public.”²¹²

Together, Gillfield’s white pastor and black deacons regulated who could preach and how and when they could do so. After being convicted of intoxication by the church in 1859, for instance, Peter Cheeseman was no longer allowed to serve as an exhorter.²¹³ When Simon Randol expressed his desire to speak “words of exhortation” in 1860, the members voted to leave the matter “to the Pastor & Deacons for further arrangements [sic]” to determine his qualifications.²¹⁴ The black deacons probably even authorized black members to preach at funeral services, for they ruled in 1849 that there should be no funeral sermons preached without first “consulting the deacons [sic].”²¹⁵ Thus, even though the House of Delegates in 1839 had rejected the Petersburg petition to allow blacks to preside at funeral services, Gillfield’s leaders seem to have continued permitting black men to preach at these ceremonies. In 1852, the church qualified the ruling about deacons’ approving funeral preaching, stating that, in the pastor’s absence, funeral preachers needed to consult the community before giving sermons (the minutes did not specify exactly whom the preachers would consult). Even while deferring to the

²¹¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1853, Jul. 6, 1851. The clerk spelled phonetically in these minutes.

²¹² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1853, Mar. 21, Apr. 4, 1852. See Feb. 3, 1850 for another example.

²¹³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, May 1 and 15, 1859.

²¹⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Oct. 21, 1860.

²¹⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Feb. 4, 1849.

sensibilities of the more vigilant members of the white citizenry, this decision demonstrated that black preachers were still active in the church and city.²¹⁶

In addition to overseeing preachers, the black deacons held many other responsibilities at Gillfield in the late antebellum period. They recommended candidates for baptism, cited members for infractions and held trials for them, collected money for church expenses, missions, and the Portsmouth Association, paid the white pastor his salary, hired church sextons, set up charitable funds for impoverished members, and generally mediated between the congregation and the pastor, who was frequently absent. By 1860, the deacons were making plans to open a catechism school in the church basement.²¹⁷ Female members even served as deaconesses at Gillfield, a practice only rarely adopted in white-led congregations. Women such as Lucy Marsh and Frances King took an active role in the disciplining of their errant sisters.²¹⁸

Disciplinary cases commanded the majority of the male and female deacons' attention. As in many churches, fighting and adultery were the most common offenses in Gillfield Baptist Church. Sometimes the two sins coincided. In 1859, the deacons cited Richard Jackson for "living with a woman without being married to her." Jackson admitted the charges were true, but stated that he "did not think it right for a woman to beat him," claiming that his female companion was "constantly knocking & cuffing him about." Despite his countercharge, the church voted him an adulterer.²¹⁹ Deacons themselves were subject to the church's discipline as well. John White was removed

²¹⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1853, Nov. 1852.

²¹⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Oct. 7 and Nov. 4, 1860.

²¹⁸ For an example of the appointment of deaconesses, see Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jun. 21, 1857.

²¹⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Mar. 20, 1859.

from office and expelled for “disagreeable living in his family.”²²⁰ Charges of slander and lying also appear frequently in church records. When disgruntled member George Taylor compared Gillfield’s deacons to “serpents [sic] under the grass poking their heads out,” the church insisted he repent of his “evil thoughts.”²²¹ Disciplining many forms of “disorder,” Gillfield’s deacons, like leaders in mixed-race churches, punished members for non-attendance, disobeying church leaders, getting drunk, swearing, dancing, and even for attending the circus.

The rulings of Gillfield’s black leaders carried weight, even among whites. As far away as the Middle Peninsula, a white-led Baptist congregation recognized a significant degree of authority in the black church’s leadership. In October of 1860, Jerril Bradby, an excluded member of Gillfield, sought entry into Colosse Church in King William County. Even after Bradby repented and admitted the “justice in the action of the Gillfield Church,” Colosse waited for the “approval of his former church” before bringing him into membership.²²² By respecting the judgment of a sister congregation, Colosse included Gillfield’s black leaders in a dialogue concerning the spiritual status of an applicant for membership.

As in the years before Nat Turner’s Rebellion, Gillfield’s leaders continued to discipline members for disobeying their masters. Mary Elliot, for instance, had to leave the church after fighting with her mistress in 1842.²²³ After Peterson Brown repented for disobeying his master, the church forgave him and retained him as a member.²²⁴ The

²²⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jan. 3, 1847. See p. 141 of this chapter, above, for earlier example of John White’s marital difficulties.

²²¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Mar. 3, 1861.

²²² Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, 1814-1870, Oct. 13, 1860.

²²³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Oct. 2, 1842.

²²⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jan. 17, 1858.

church also punished members who got into trouble with the law. Ned Allen was expelled from fellowship in 1858 for “being whipped at the public whipping post, for being drunk and falling over the Mayor’s foot.”²²⁵ Likewise, Mary Jackson came before the church for “having some stripes ordered by the Mayor,” who presided over the local court that dealt with minor offenses.²²⁶ When Wesley Peters was whipped and jailed for “breaking the peace” in 1861, he confessed his offenses before the church. While some members wanted to retain him in fellowship, the majority voted to expel him.²²⁷

Gillfield’s members indeed seemed eager to protect the church’s image in the community, knowing full well that some whites opposed the congregation’s semi-autonomous activities. Those who fell on the wrong side of the law tarnished the reputation of the church and threatened those freedoms it did possess—many of which, after all, skirted the formal law. Although they frequently met without whites present and even authorized blacks to preach, some black leaders were still concerned that the church should follow the state’s racial code. Abraham Robertson told the congregation in 1858 that he felt “a delicacy” in attending prayer meetings without a white man there. The members then voted to suspend the prayer meetings until the white pastor could commit to attend.²²⁸ A few months later, after holding a business meeting without the white pastor, the church noted the importance of “having a white man to make their meetings lawfull [sic]” at the next gathering.²²⁹ Just as white officials only enforced the laws some of the time, black church members obeyed them sporadically. Walking a middle road

²²⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jan. 1 and 17, 1858.

²²⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Dec. 2, 1860.

²²⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Aug. 4, 1861. See also Nov. 15 and Dec. 26, 1857 for two other examples.

²²⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jun. 6, 1858.

²²⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Aug. 22 and Sept. 5, 1858. See also Feb. 21, 1858.

between obedience and defiance, blacks at Gillfield clearly exemplified the complexity of southern evangelicalism.

One of the main reasons that Gillfield had difficulty finding white men to attend its meetings was because, like many other churches, the congregation had difficulty paying the pastors on time. Crowder's and Robinson's negligence in attending meetings during the 1850s may well have been tied to the frequently tardy payment of their salaries. To help raise the funds, the deacons appointed members to solicit pledges and collect money from congregants. The church ruled that those who pledged to contribute to the pastor's salary but failed to pay would be disciplined.²³⁰ Gillfield even held fundraising events in the community to "get up the Pastor's money."²³¹ The women of the congregation offered their support by hosting holiday fairs.²³² In 1860, four men and four women were appointed to raise money "out[side] the walls of the church" in various wards of the city.²³³ The church apparently maintained enough support in Petersburg to make such campaigns feasible; the contributors to this as to most church fund drives of the time likely included blacks and whites alike.

Petersburg's white citizens also became involved in Gillfield's campaign to construct a brick building in the 1850s. Many churches in the region launched building projects around the same time, thanks to expanding memberships and successful fundraising, even during the economic crash that occurred in the latter part of the decade. Gillfield hired two of its own members, contractors C.B. Stephens and John Hill, to

²³⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Apr. 6, 1857.

²³¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jan. 1, 1860.

²³² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, May 17 and Jun. 7, 1857. For a discussion of the impressive fundraising efforts of Gillfield's female members, see Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 219, 223-25.

²³³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Aug. 19, 1860; see also Jan. 1, 1860.

construct the new building.²³⁴ Setting a tax of \$5 per member on 500 members, Gillfield was able to raise half the cost of the edifice even before construction began.²³⁵

Knowing that the members would not be able to raise all the necessary funds, deacon Coy Quivers was “licensed” to “ask aid of the public at large” in building the meeting house.²³⁶ As when raising money for the pastor’s salary, members of the congregation held concerts and fairs to draw funds from the community. Gillfield sent two leaders specifically to approach local white churches for aid as well.²³⁷ African Baptist churches in other cities and states were also asked for contributions.²³⁸ Late in 1859, Pastor Robinson personally traveled to Baltimore and Philadelphia to raise funds on behalf of the church.²³⁹ At the building’s dedication in May 1860, the congregation’s leaders made room for white people to attend the festivities, and Robinson was appointed to express the church’s gratitude to the “sisters, brothers, friends, and public at large for their benevolence.”²⁴⁰ Despite laws that in principle threatened the church’s independence, Gillfield’s members constructed and dedicated an impressive \$7,000 brick building with the approval and even the support of many whites in the city.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Perry Street was home to a thriving community of black evangelicals who worshipped at Gillfield under nominal white leadership. The black deacons maintained much of the congregation’s pre-Turner sovereignty. In the words of historian Luther Jackson, Gillfield was part of a “forward movement” in black church life in the period after Nat Turner’s Rebellion. Naming this period the “heyday of

²³⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Apr. 19, 1857, Jun. 6, Aug. 1, 1858.

²³⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Feb. 28, Mar. 6, 1858; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 160-61.

²³⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, May 15, 1859.

²³⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 17, 1859.

²³⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 3, Nov. 20, 1859.

²³⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Dec. 4, 1859.

²⁴⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Apr. 15, 1860.

economic prosperity” for free blacks in Virginia, Jackson identified more than \$60,000 in church property owned by free blacks in the state between 1830 and 1860.²⁴¹ Even more than its physical expansion, however, Gillfield’s spiritual prosperity is worth emphasizing. Thousands of converts were baptized into this congregation, and hundreds of wayward members learned the strictness of the church’s discipline under the vigilant eyes of black leaders. Through a long series of negotiations with white Baptist leadership and local whites, Gillfield’s black leaders managed to wield significant authority in the congregation well before emancipation.

While Gillfield managed to preserve some of its freedoms and still remain a member of the Portsmouth Association, the black church on Bute Street in Norfolk was actually excluded during the 1840s. At the center of First Norfolk’s conflict with the Portsmouth Association stood its pastor James Mitchell, the Englishman with antislavery sympathies. Because Mitchell was white, the church did not need to seek a new pastor to obey the state laws of 1832. At some point, however, Mitchell fell out of favor with whites in the Portsmouth Association and in the city. After his wife died in 1807, Mitchell had become a target for gossip as a middle-aged widower with children, especially since he probably employed female servants to care for his home and family. The rumors were no doubt exacerbated by his unpopular views on slavery and his close involvement with members of the church. When Mitchell married Lucy, a black woman,

²⁴¹ Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 163-64.

in February 1840, he openly demonstrated his personal ties with local blacks and the degree to which he was willing to challenge traditional racial mores.²⁴²

James Mitchell had apparently gained enough attention in the community that a Norfolk newspaper printed an anonymous complaint to the state legislature in February of 1839. While not specifically mentioning the black Baptist church or its pastor, the writer protested that, under the laws of 1832, black assemblies could hire white pastors of their choosing, exposing these churches to all kinds of “evils,” and even to the “diabolical principles” of abolitionists. The author recommended that the General Assembly amend the laws so that pastors of black churches would be required to be members in “good standing” of churches “exclusively” governed by whites.²⁴³ The state never enacted such an amendment, but the issue remained on the minds of some whites in the region.

Whether in response to this article or on its own initiative, the Portsmouth Association placed formal restrictions on its black churches a few months later, making

²⁴² *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 5; Murray, ed., *Historic First Baptist Church*, 15, 17; Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 145-46; Norfolk City, Returns of Marriages, Births, Etc., 1799-1853, 149, Feb. 16, 1840, City of Norfolk, Marriage Records and Vital Statistics, microfilm reel 50. The Reverend A.L. Hitselberger of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church performed the marriage ceremony, and only two witnesses, black women Clarissa and Elizabeth, attended, indicating that Mitchell may have been unable to find a Baptist minister or other witnesses. A Virginia law of 1792 mandated a \$250 fine for any minister who performed an interracial marriage; this law also stated that the white partner in the marriage would be fined and imprisoned for six months. Acts of the General Assembly, 1792, Chap. 42: 17 and 18, Samuel Shepherd, ed., *Certain Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, in *The Statutes of at Large of Virginia, from October 1792, to December 1806, inclusive...Vol. I*, (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1835), 134-35. The fact that Mitchell's marriage, along with another interracial marriage performed by Hitselberger in 1844, was recorded by a Norfolk City clerk indicates that this law was probably not strictly enforced. Whether Mitchell actually spent time in prison for the marriage remains uncertain. Bogger notes that the Catholic priest would have been exempt from the \$250 fine because he was a “not a minister.” Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 146. Yet the Code of Virginia of 1819, which would have been in place at the time of Mitchell's marriage, made no distinction between Protestant and Catholic clergymen, stating that “no minister or person whatsoever,” could perform an interracial marriage. The Code described clergymen simply as “ministers of the gospel.” The Code included a separate section for how Quaker and Jewish marriages could be solemnized, but did not have a separate section for Catholics. *The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia...1819, Vol. I* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1819), C-106:2, 6, and 23, pp. 394-96, 401.

²⁴³ *American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*, Feb. 5, 1839, cited in Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 148.

special reference to “the trouble in the First Church in Norfolk.” The association resolved to “no longer hold them in connexion” unless the congregation agreed to hire a white pastor who was also a member of the nearest white-led Baptist church.²⁴⁴ A week after their meeting, association delegates visited First Norfolk to present the ruling. According to their report, Mitchell opposed the measures—which clearly violated Baptist congregational government—as “arbitrary, unjust, and unconstitutional.” The delegates also investigated Mitchell’s “moral character,” depicting him as “a reproach upon [the] denomination.” Because of his age and “other circumstances” (possibly illness) the delegates advised him to resign rather than expel him.²⁴⁵

The conflict did not end there. Opposition to Mitchell was not confined to whites; about forty members had already separated from the church and were gathering at an old Presbyterian meeting house at the corner of Charlotte and Catharine Streets, which was renamed Bank Street after the war.²⁴⁶ According to the association, these “respectable” members had disapproved of the “general course” pursued by Mitchell in both his ministry and his private affairs.²⁴⁷ One oral account given to Luther Jackson described how, when Mitchell broke the bread for communion one Sunday, this “company of malcontents” arose, “gathered up the cloth and sacred elements,” and “with gesticulations

²⁴⁴ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1839*, 13-14. The above church histories, Tommy Bogger, and Cassandra Newby all have cited Mitchell’s marriage date as February 16, 1839 and thus before the Portsmouth Association passed its regulations on black churches that May. Upon close examination, however, the marriage record actually states that the union took place on February 16, 1840. Mitchell’s relationship with blacks probably still influenced the association’s decision to place his church under stricter supervision in 1839, but it appears that the association was not reacting to his interracial marriage when it passed the regulations. Norfolk City, Returns of Marriages, Births, Etc., 1799-1853.

²⁴⁵ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1840*, 5-6.

²⁴⁶ Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 299; Newby, “‘The World Was All Before Them,’” 296 fn 19.

²⁴⁷ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1840*, 5-6, 18; Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 149.

and angry cries rushed indignantly from the church.”²⁴⁸ That this dramatic departure occurred immediately before communion is deeply significant: the protestors were openly refusing fellowship with those loyal to Mitchell.

Leading the breakaway group was a free black drayman named Ackey White, who had long-standing business connections with whites in the city.²⁴⁹ Freed in 1824 and thus technically required to leave Virginia within a year, White had remained in the state unchallenged, though he did decide in the mid-1830s to petition the General Assembly for formal permission to stay in Virginia. He cited the “confidence and respect of the mercantile community” as a reason he should be exempt from the expulsion law.²⁵⁰ White’s petition was granted, and he continued to enjoy the support of white neighbors and merchants. Based on an interview with the son of a former member, Luther Jackson concluded that Mitchell’s white opponents (he does not specify whether in the city or in the Baptist association) probably “urged” Ackey White and his party to leave the controversial church.²⁵¹

In May 1840, the Portsmouth Association formally recognized the new black congregation on Charlotte and Catharine Streets, expressing “entire confidence” in its operation, and appointed a committee to locate a white pastor.²⁵² Robert Gordon soon took the post and served this church for the next thirteen years.²⁵³ After several years, the

²⁴⁸ For this account, Jackson cites an interview with Richard Tucker, a “son of one of the members who remained loyal to Mitchell.” Jackson, “Religious Development,” 223 fn 145.

²⁴⁹ Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 148. Ackey White is listed in the Federal Census of 1850 as a seventy-year-old drayman with real estate of \$500. His wife Rachel, 60, and daughter Amy, 15, whose freedom he had also purchased, are listed with him. U.S. Federal Census of 1850, Norfolk City.

²⁵⁰ Virginia General Assembly, legislative petitions of the General Assembly, Dec. 28, 1836, microfilm reel 214, Norfolk City, 1831-1847, state government records collection, LVA.

²⁵¹ Jackson, “Religious Development,” 223 fn 145; see footnote 248 of this chapter, above.

²⁵² *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1840*, 5-7, 18.

²⁵³ Reuben Jones, *A History of the Portsmouth Baptist Association...* (Raleigh, [N.C.]: Edwards, Broughton, 1881), 225.

congregation was able to purchase the building in which it met from the white Presbyterian church.²⁵⁴ In deeming this group the “First Church” of Norfolk, the association turned its back on Mitchell’s congregation, which had held that title for four decades. Supported by the loyal members of his church on Bute Street, Mitchell decided to remain as pastor there, and as a result this body no longer held a seat at the annual association.

The Bute Street congregation continued to meet, apparently unmolested by city officials in Norfolk, despite its exclusion from the white-led Baptist association. Indeed, it is remarkable that a white man with antislavery leanings, who had married a black woman, was permitted to *live in* Norfolk, much less to continue leading a controversial black church there. Even as it defended its sovereignty, however, Mitchell’s church also sought reconciliation with the Portsmouth Association. Unwilling to accept a separation from the larger Baptist fellowship, the church, still calling itself “First Baptist,” appealed to the association for readmittance on three separate occasions in 1843, 1844, and 1847.²⁵⁵ Portsmouth rejected each of these appeals, stating that those who wanted to “pursue a course satisfactory to the Association” should join the recognized First Baptist Church under Robert Gordon.²⁵⁶

When the elderly James Mitchell became too infirm to perform his duties, the church members knew they would need to find another white man to serve as pastor. Without a seat in the Portsmouth Association, the church must have been hard pressed to find someone willing to accept the position. At this point, the congregation consented to

²⁵⁴ Jackson, “Religious Development,” 230.

²⁵⁵ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1843*, 4; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1844*, 9; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1847*, 10.

²⁵⁶ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1844*, 9.

give up much of its autonomy for the recognition, leadership, and social cover that the regional association could provide. In September of 1848, church leaders appointed a committee to meet with the elders of local Baptist congregations to restore the association's "confidence" in the church.²⁵⁷ The members elected Robert Allen of the Portsmouth Baptist Church as pastor, and he assisted in revising their constitution to meet the approval of the white presbytery. (Presbyterians were not the only Christians to convene such bodies; although committed to congregational governance, Baptists occasionally set up presbyteries—or groups of elders—to collaborate on interchurch issues or conflicts, or, as in this case, to oversee a black congregation. Richmond's First African Church was also organized and supervised by a white presbytery.) Wishing to demonstrate their willingness to submit to oversight, church leaders composed an ingratiating statement declaring their desire to "live more like the people of the Lord." They averred that the church had seen the "error" of Mitchell's ways, and that they had been "always anxious to do what is right" in unity with the association.²⁵⁸

Pleased that the repentant members had "acknowledged their error" and "waived their claim to be considered the First church," the Portsmouth Association formally recognized the congregation as Bute Street Colored Baptist in May of 1849.²⁵⁹ Historian Tommy Bogger asserts that black members used Mitchell's pastorate as a means "to thwart the 1832 law" for as long as they could, and then appealed deferentially to the association, thus practicing the "duplicity that free blacks often exhibited before the

²⁵⁷ First Baptist Church Minute Book, Archives, First Baptist Church, Norfolk, cited in Murray, ed., *Historic First Baptist Church*, 23. The First Baptist Church, Norfolk, currently holds this minute book in a safe deposit box, and the church trustees declined to make it available for research.

²⁵⁸ First Baptist Church Minute Book, Archives, First Baptist Church, Norfolk, cited in Murray, ed., *Historic First Baptist Church*, 24-26. James Mitchell died in February of 1849 at the age of eighty. Murray, ed., *Historic First Baptist Church*, 26.

²⁵⁹ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1849*, 3, 16.

larger white community.”²⁶⁰ It seems equally plausible, however, that some of the members at Bute Street genuinely recanted their former defense of Mitchell and believed that the church should operate under the authority of the white association, while others made a calculated decision to protect the church when left without the cover of a white pastor. Perhaps individual members even struggled with their own consciences on this issue. In any case, relationships between black and white Baptists in the region once again proved changeable, punctuated with unexpected moments of resistance, cooperation, and accommodation.

Although ready to submit to a white pastor, the members of Bute Street Baptist still made their voices heard. The congregation had accepted Robert Allen as pastor, but his lack of ordination was a source of frustration. Early in 1849, the black leaders carefully penned a letter to the Portsmouth Baptist Church expressing gratitude for the “manifestations” of “christian sympathy” toward Bute Street and an “appreciation” of Allen’s “christian zeal.” But they went on to lament that, because Allen was not ordained, Bute Street was “debarred the Ordinances of the Church of Christ”—referring to baptism and communion—and was “compelled to solicit the services of another.” Bute Street then recommended that Portsmouth Baptist consider Allen for ordination.²⁶¹ In response, Portsmouth Baptist “resolved” to grant this request and formed a committee to arrange the ceremony.²⁶² It is unclear whether the ordination ever actually took place, and a year later, Allen was expelled from Portsmouth Baptist for “having made an assault

²⁶⁰ Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 150.

²⁶¹ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1853, Feb. 9, 1849. For another example of cooperation and tension between the leadership of Bute Street Baptist and Portsmouth (renamed Court Street) Baptist, see Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1875, Jun. 12, 1857.

²⁶² Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 9, May 11, Jul. 6, 1849. A note—“He was never ordained”—which was penciled in different handwriting from the rest of the minutes, follows the July resolution to ordain Allen. The author and date of this note are unknown.

on his wife.”²⁶³ He later repented and reentered the church, but his preaching license was not restored.²⁶⁴ Forced to find another white pastor, Bute Street hired the Reverend Vincent Palen in 1851.²⁶⁵ Portsmouth Baptist clearly held the final say on Allen’s qualifications as pastor of the Bute Street Church. Yet through their persistence, the members of the black church had won the ear of white leaders with their request that Allen be considered for ordination.

As at Gillfield, black leadership persisted at Bute Street despite the interference of the association. Under Mitchell’s leadership, the black leaders had directed almost all of the church’s business, and they continued to do so even after the association readmitted their congregation. The most prominent of these men was free black member Lewis Tucker, who had been baptized in 1842 during the church’s exclusion from the association and was active as a church leader during and after Mitchell’s term. Tucker’s family record book notes that he was “called to preach” in 1845 and was licensed to do so in 1859. The fourteen-year gap between his calling and licensing is unusual; perhaps the granting of his license was put off because of Bute Street’s conflict with the association in the 1840s. Although Virginia law prohibited blacks from preaching, and although the Bute Street church had a series of white pastors who could have enforced that rule, Tucker was apparently exercising his gifts anyway.²⁶⁶ According to a Norfolk newspaper, other black Baptists were also leading religious meetings in the city. After

²⁶³ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. and Sept. 6, 1850.

²⁶⁴ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 7 and 10, 1850.

²⁶⁵ *1800-1850, Norfolk’s Most Unusual Church, 7; Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 6.

²⁶⁶ Lewis Tucker Family and Church Record Book, 1849-1890, front matter, in Carter G. Woodson Collection of Negro Papers and Related Documents, 1803-1936, Part I, microfilm reel 8, LVA. Also recorded was Lewis Tucker’s marriage to Elizabeth Hunter in 1849, by Rev. Robert Allen, as well as the births of nine children. Luther Jackson cited the First Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 10, 1859, as stating that Tucker was appointed to assist the pastor in the “public administration of the word of God” and even to conduct meetings when the pastor did not attend. Jackson, “Religious Development,” 228.

giving a “short discourse” at one gathering, the white minister “gave up the service to the [black] brethren” who led the congregants in “lively” worship.²⁶⁷ Tucker’s influence only expanded during the Civil War, when he was ordained and elected as pastor of the church.²⁶⁸

The members at Bute Street had not only maintained enough autonomy to appoint black leaders; they also launched a successful building campaign in the 1850s. Several thousand dollars were raised from the congregation and through special events, and the new brick structure was dedicated in 1859.²⁶⁹ A year earlier, someone had set fire to the old building, causing significant damage.²⁷⁰ Although the perpetrator and his motive remained unknown, one wonders whether the arsonist was protesting the freedoms exercised by black Baptists in Norfolk. In any event, the church prospered in the decade before the war, and by 1860, the membership had reached 338.²⁷¹ The congregation had persevered through the trials of the antebellum years, and its leaders continued to shepherd blacks in the community. Demonstrating his approach to leadership amid adversity, Lewis Tucker inscribed this motto in his family record book: “be honest, free, frank, upright and fear no man...by this course I can demand respect, my mind will be contented, I will feel independence.”²⁷² Blacks in the antebellum church on Bute Street had indeed “felt” independence even in the face of constraints.

²⁶⁷ *Daily Southern Argus*, Jun. 26, 1854, cited in Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, 151.

²⁶⁸ Tucker Family and Church Record Book, front matter.

²⁶⁹ *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 6-7; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 160.

²⁷⁰ *Southern Argus*, Dec. 24, 1858, cited in *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 6.

²⁷¹ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1860*, insert.

²⁷² Tucker Family and Church Record Book, front matter.

In Virginia's capital city, the largest and most prominent of the state's African American churches was established in 1841, ten years after the Nat Turner crisis. The sanctuary of the First African Baptist Church of Richmond accommodated hundreds of free black and enslaved worshippers in the late antebellum period. This church's early history offers a prime example of the interaction between interracial cooperation, racial tension, and black autonomy. Formally organized by a presbytery of white elders, First African developed out of a long-standing desire of both white and black Baptists for separate worship. As early as 1821, representatives from First Baptist solicited the advice of the Dover Association on the matter. Without explaining its reasons, the association concluded that forming an African church would be "inexpedient."²⁷³ Numerous members of First Baptist had evidently thought the idea promising, but perhaps other Dover representatives felt that a black congregation would draw negative attention from whites in the city.

While First Baptist corresponded with the Dover Association about the project, Richmond blacks attempted to win the aid of the state government. In 1823, ninety-two free blacks petitioned the House of Delegates to enact a law establishing an African Baptist Church. A number of these petitioners were active black leaders and preachers at First Baptist. It does not appear that, in petitioning the state legislature, these men were anticipating favorable action on this issue by the Dover Association.²⁷⁴ The petition described how black Christians were sometimes excluded from churches "used by white

²⁷³ *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association...1821*, 6.

²⁷⁴ The petitioners included black leaders and preachers Hembrey Tompkins, William Caswell, Wilson Morris, Ned Cary, William Reynolds, Caesar Hawkins, and Richard Vaughan of First Baptist. Virginia General Assembly, legislative petitions to the General Assembly, Dec. 3, 1823, microfilm reel 222, Richmond, 1817-1831, state government records collection, LVA. Some of the signers, including Morris and Caswell, as well as Isham Ellis and Pleasant Price, later served as deacons of the First African Baptist Church. First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930, Oct. 3, 1841, LVA.

persons” because of overcrowding or the lack of an “appropriate place...assigned” for them. As a result, they were forced to worship in equally crowded “private Houses.” Willing to adhere to the state’s “restrictions and restraints” on black assemblies, such as the prohibition of night meetings of slaves, the black petitioners “cheerfully” agreed to submit to the mayor’s supervision of their preachers and leaders.²⁷⁵ Although state legislators did draft a bill in response to the petition, they did not pass it into law, indicating that the proposal garnered both support and opposition in the General Assembly—or perhaps that it fell victim to the apathy of white delegates.²⁷⁶

Likewise, whites in the city held a variety of opinions regarding the proposed black church. Following the signatures of the free blacks on the petition were the endorsements of ten well-known white citizens, including Richmond’s mayor, John Adams, and the Master of Police, Joseph Price. Both men believed that an African congregation would be a “benefit” to both blacks and whites in the city. Adams, Price, and the other white signers recommended the free black petitioners as “respectable,” “orderly,” and “well-disposed people” of “good character,” and Mayor Adams wished them “success” in the endeavor.²⁷⁷ With news of Denmark Vesey’s alleged slave conspiracy having come from South Carolina the previous year, it is remarkable that Richmond officials offered such hearty support to a group of black evangelicals seeking

²⁷⁵ Legislative petition, Dec. 3, 1823. For Virginia’s ban on night meetings of enslaved people, see Acts of the General Assembly, 1804, CXIX:1, in *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Three* (Richmond: Meriwether Jones, [1804]), 89.

²⁷⁶ Legislative petition, Dec. 3, 1823, explanatory note at the end of petition. See also, *Journals of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia...* (Richmond, VA: Thomas Ritchie, 1823), Dec. 8, 1823, 34; Dec. 10, 1823, 39; Dec. 13, 1823, 47, LVA. The delegates voted to postpone discussion of the bill until March 31, 1824, but the session ended March 10, indicating that the bill was dropped.

²⁷⁷ Legislative petition, Dec. 3, 1823, endorsements after petition signatures.

their own meeting space.²⁷⁸ These men were almost certainly placated by the black people's ready assurance of adherence to the laws, and the petitioners had no doubt calculated that. The white endorsers may also have genuinely respected these blacks.

In the end, the endorsement of such reputable whites was not enough to see the church established. Yet black men persevered as deacons at First Baptist. In 1830, they again asked the church to consider having a separate meeting house built for them, but nothing came of this request.²⁷⁹ A few years later, a group of Richmond free blacks once again petitioned the state government, this time for relief from the post-Turner legislation. Like the petition of Petersburg citizens in 1839, the document explained how the state's proscription against religious gatherings led by blacks prevented "many coloured human beings" from finding white ministers to perform funeral services. The petitioners "pray[ed] the passage of a law" that would allow free blacks and slaves to conduct these ceremonies, provided they acquire a temporary license to do so from the (white) pastor of their church.²⁸⁰ Included among the eleven petitioners were Richard Vaughan and William Ballendine, black leaders at the First and Second Baptist Churches, as well as Gilbert Hunt, Isham Ellis, and Joseph Abrams, who would later serve as founding deacons of the First African Church.²⁸¹

As in the petition of 1823, white leaders stepped forward to support the request; several local pastors from a variety of denominations provided endorsements for black-

²⁷⁸ Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1999); "The Making of a Slave Conspiracy," Forum, Parts 1 and 2, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 58 (Oct. 2001), 913-76, and 59 (Jan. 2002), 135-268; Robert L. Paquette, "From Rebellion to Revisionism: The Continuing Debate About the Denmark Vesey Affair," *Journal of the Historical Society* 4 (Fall 2004), 291-334.

²⁷⁹ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 3, 1830.

²⁸⁰ Virginia General Assembly, legislative petitions to the General Assembly, Dec. 17, 1834, microfilm reel 223, Richmond, 1831-1840, state government records collection, LVA.

²⁸¹ Legislative petition, Dec. 17, 1834; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 3, 1841.

led funeral ceremonies. Steven Taylor, pastor of a Presbyterian church, expressed his “sympathies” for the “grievance” of the black petitioners. Isaac Hinton, J.B. Taylor, and H. Keeling, of the First, Second, and Third Baptist Churches, concurred. One minister, David Daggate of the Richmond Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote that he would “rejoice” if the legislature granted the request, while another white man, W. Marshall, insisted that “humanity would dictate” the passage of such a law. John B. Clopton, a local circuit judge, also offered his support.²⁸² Careful to reassure all who might worry about upholding the social order, a few of these men noted that they did not envision any “evil” or “mischief” that would arise in granting the petition, provided that the “interests of the Commonwealth” were maintained.²⁸³ Once again, the state legislature failed to pass a law in response to the blacks’ petition.²⁸⁴ Yet despite the tensions following Nat Turner’s Rebellion, black evangelicals clearly still held the favor of influential whites in the city, who sought to balance the desires of blacks with the traditional racial code.

The same mindset pervaded the white leadership at First Baptist Church, and in the late 1830s, the Reverend Jeremiah B. Jeter led a renewed attempt to form a separate

²⁸² John B. Clopton was elected judge of the Seventh Judicial Circuit in February 1834. *Journal of the Senate, Begun and Held in Capitol, in the City of Richmond... of the Commonwealth of Virginia...1833* (Richmond: John Warrock, 1833), 155.

²⁸³ Legislative petition, Dec. 17, 1834, endorsements after petition signatures. While most people in Richmond were probably indifferent to the project, some whites staunchly opposed the black church. According to the Reverend Jeremiah Jeter of First Baptist Church, the hostility of some Richmond whites, particularly in light of the Turner uprising and abolitionist scares, presented obstacles, “Many pious people looked with distrust...on all new measures for the religious instruction of the negroes. All classes of irreligious persons—sceptics [sic], gamblers, bar-keepers, and the like...were bitter and fierce in their opposition to the proposed organization.” Jeremiah Bell Jeter, *The Recollections of a Long Life* (Richmond, VA: Religious Herald Co., 1891), 209-10; Robert Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” in *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, 1780-1880* (Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), 248-50, 263.

²⁸⁴ *Journals of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia...* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1834), Feb. 27, 1835, 198, LVA.

black church.²⁸⁵ The membership of First Baptist had reached two thousand, and about 80 percent were slaves and free blacks.²⁸⁶ When writing his memoirs years later, Jeter recalled that supervising the enormous black membership was a “heavy burden” for whites in the church, and that the meeting house was becoming exceedingly crowded. Believing that the “style of preaching demanded by the white congregation was not well adapted to the instruction of the colored people,” Jeter insisted that the black members required a full-time white pastor to preach, baptize, and oversee discipline.²⁸⁷ According to the renowned abolitionist Henry “Box” Brown, who, as a slave, had daringly escaped Richmond by shipping himself in a crate to the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society in 1849, Jeter’s aim in establishing the black church was to “devise some plan by which the masters could more effectively prevent their negroes from escaping.” Brown’s narrative consistently identifies slaveholding Christianity as a “system of mere delusion,” and thus he viewed the motivations of men such as Jeter as utilitarian rather than spiritual—as purely bigoted rather than as a paradoxical amalgam of racial prejudice and pastoral concern.²⁸⁸ Contemporary minutes of First Baptist described how the “peculiar habits,

²⁸⁵ Robert Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1” *American Baptist Memorial* 15 (Sept. 1855), 262-3; Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 247-48. Blacks at First Baptist occasionally met separately at earlier points, such as in 1834 when First Baptist granted the “use of the meeting house...to the coloured [sic] members of the church and congregation for the purpose of holding their African anniversary meeting on next or Easter Monday.” First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1831-1840, Mar. 24, 1834, VBHS. The details of the “African anniversary meeting” were not discussed, but perhaps the blacks were holding a celebration to commemorate the Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society, organized in 1815.

²⁸⁶ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1838*, 3-4.

²⁸⁷ Jeter, *Recollections*, 209; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1” 262-3; Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 247-48.

²⁸⁸ Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written By Himself* (Manchester, Lee and Glynn, 1851), 29-30, available online at Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter DocSouth), added 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html> (accessed Sept. 14, 2012); see also Suzette Spencer, “Henry Box Brown (1815 or 1816–after February 26, 1889),” *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Jan. 12, 2012), in *Encyclopedia Virginia*: http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Brown_Henry_Box_ca_1815 (accessed Sept. 14, 2012).

views and prejudices” of blacks in the congregation dictated the need for their own church; of course, the report neglected to mention how the prejudices of white members were involved.²⁸⁹ Whites at First Baptist obviously had little desire to engage in church activities with black people.²⁹⁰

Part of the incentive for establishing a separate church for blacks also lay in the white members’ desire for a new building. In 1838, First Baptist’s leaders voted that if the appraised value of the old meeting house (\$13,000) could be raised by and for black Baptists, then the church would turn over the building’s title to a group of trustees for a separate black congregation.²⁹¹ A few years later, First Baptist significantly reduced that sum, agreeing to convey the title for \$7,500.²⁹² Citizens of Richmond, many of whom were “outside Baptist circles” donated almost \$3,000 of that total. Some of the contributors were also slaveholders. The black members needed to raise the balance, which they paid in full, with interest, by 1849.²⁹³ With one of the largest halls in the city, this well-known building on Broad Street was not only equipped to house hundreds of

²⁸⁹ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 23, 1839.

²⁹⁰ Beth Barton Schweiger argues that the establishment of separate services and churches for black members in urban areas stemmed from the “social aspirations of an increasingly prosperous white membership”; black congregants generally were not included in urban white Christians’ pursuit of social “respectability.” Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51-53, quotation on 51. While Schweiger certainly exaggerates the degree to which whites eschewed fellowship with blacks during this period, her study of how white Baptists increasingly emphasized “refinement” in the nineteenth century provides helpful context on this subject.

²⁹¹ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 7, 1838. In Brown’s account, Jeter “managed, with the assistance of his church members, to get the negroes all round the district to believe that out of love for them, and from pure regard to their spiritual interests,” the meeting house would be sold to them for a “small portion” of its value. Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, 1851 ed., 30. Schweiger discusses how an increasingly materialistic First Baptist “reinvented itself” by constructing an impressive Greek Revival structure and giving its old building to First African in a “gesture that underscored the humble appearance of the old church.” Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 43.

²⁹² First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 26, 1841.

²⁹³ Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 250; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1,” 263; Jeter, *Recollections*, 211; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 4, Jun. 21, 1846; Apr. 2, Nov. 12 and Dec. 4, 1848; Feb. 4, 1849; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 161.

congregants each week, but also to host concerts, lectures, and even political meetings for white people, as it had done in 1829 for the Virginia Constitutional Convention. The African church would be able draw rent from such gatherings in the future.²⁹⁴

The transfer of this sizeable property highlights the intricacy of cross-racial exchanges in southern churches and in the larger southern culture. Whites at First Baptist agreed to sell the church building to its own black members at a reduced rate, and certain whites in Richmond offered funds for the cause. For several years, the black members raised a considerable amount of money to pay off the debt. Whether or not the white contributors saw their donations as furthering “order” among blacks, the black members gladly combined whites’ assistance with their own efforts to acquire the property and establish a church of their own.

White Baptist leaders carefully set up the governance of the African church to satisfy legal restrictions and public scrutiny. Joined by the Second and Third Baptist congregations, First Baptist adopted a strict “plan” for the church, which included the appointment of twenty-four white elders—drawn in part from the three congregations—to superintend the black church. The black members would elect thirty “experienced and judicious” black deacons, to be confirmed by the white “Superintending Committee.” Together, the whites and blacks would select a white minister to lead the church. Due to the large membership, the government was more “presbyterial than congregational,” meaning the leaders held more power than in a traditionally democratic Baptist congregation. The plan further mandated that meetings would be held during the daytime, to be attended by the pastor and at least two members of the white committee.

²⁹⁴ Jeter, *Recollections*, 210; Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 45.

The black deacons would direct all applications for baptism, transfers of membership, discipline cases, church finances, and “all other business,” except in “cases of any difficulty,” at which point the white committee could intervene to make a final decision; the latter happened only two times in the antebellum years. Upon passage of this plan, the black members of these churches were “dismissed” to join the new African congregation.²⁹⁵ Pleased with the plan of government, Dover offered First African the “right hand of fellowship” in October of 1841, declaring it the association’s duty to “extend its fostering care and counsel.”²⁹⁶

Robert Ryland, the 36-year-old president of Richmond College, which had been founded as a Baptist seminary in 1830, accepted the post as pastor. His salary of \$500 would be raised by “penny collections at each meeting” of the black congregation.²⁹⁷ When writing about the church’s early history long after the Civil War, Ryland listed his reasons for taking the position. He thought that separating blacks and whites would benefit all Richmond Baptists and expressed it his “duty” to advance that goal. He also discussed his opposition to the cruelties of slavery, such as the separation of families. A slaveholder himself, he accepted the institution with the popular southern evangelical mindset as “the mysterious hand of God leading Africans to Jesus,” but he deplored the prohibition of black preaching, which he believed violated “freedom of conscience in regard both to the whites and the blacks.” Considering that law, Ryland felt it his duty to “put forth new efforts to evangelize the people of color.” Finally, he believed that by

²⁹⁵ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 8, Sept. 22, 1841; Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1820-1843, Jul. 5, Sept. 23, Oct. 28, 1841; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1,” 263; Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 251. See also Charles F. Irons, “And All These Things Shall Be Added Unto You: The First African Baptist Church, Richmond, 1841-1865,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 47 (Winter 1998), 26-35.

²⁹⁶ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1841*, 6.

²⁹⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, front matter; Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 251-52.

converting black Americans, he would prepare missionaries to spread the gospel in Africa.²⁹⁸

Exemplifying the southern white evangelical's conflicted, complicated views on race and slavery, Ryland seemed both to respect and demean his black congregants at various points in his career. On the one hand, he described his pleasure in accepting the pastorship to his wife Josephine in July of 1841, thinking his "talents" might be "better suited" to a black church, and added that if "God gave [him] souls from among them," his "ambition [would] be gratified."²⁹⁹ A few years later, when recounting the "low ebb" of religion in the city to his father, he remarked that he nonetheless had a "pleasant meeting" with a "crowded house" at the African church and mentioned how the black members sang "most sweetly."³⁰⁰ When writing about the church for a Richmond Baptist publication in 1855, Ryland remarked that "in a world where neither birth, nor color, nor wealth, nor station, nor social position, nor intellectual polish, but only *moral* excellence will be esteemed," hundreds of members at First African would be "raised to the highest seats of honor."³⁰¹ As such comments indicate, Ryland held unorthodox views on race, and his work at First African was viewed with suspicion by many local whites.³⁰²

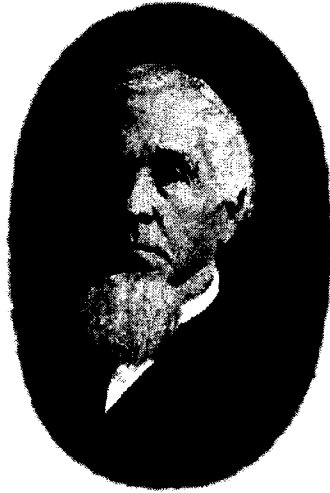
²⁹⁸ Ryland, "Origin of the First African Church," 252-54. Likewise, in a commencement address given at Richmond College in 1890, Ryland remarked that he "esteemed it a holy privilege to preach the gospel to the poor; and while the negroes were in bondage and forbidden by law to have colored ministers, and even to assemble by themselves for worship," he "felt that it would be an awful crime for any white preacher to decline such an opportunity." Robert Ryland, "The Virginia Baptist Education Society...An Address by Robert Ryland" (Richmond: Library, Richmond College, 1891), 22, Robert Ryland Papers, VBHS.

²⁹⁹ Robert Ryland to Josephine Ryland, Jul. 29, 1841, Letters to Josephine Ryland, 1830-1845, Robert Ryland Papers.

³⁰⁰ Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, Mar. 23, 1846, Letters to Josiah Ryland, 1823-1849, Robert Ryland Papers.

³⁰¹ Ryland, "Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1," 265.

³⁰² For a helpful discussion of how Ryland "stood out in contrast to most southern white workers" among blacks, see Jackson, "Religious Development," 224-26. See also Irons, "And All These Things," 29.



Robert Ryland (1805-1899), pastor of First African Baptist Church (1841-1865)
Photograph is not dated, but it appears to have been taken after the Civil War.
Photograph courtesy of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia

In his post-war writings, Ryland again defended the church, and blacks in general, as a people of “godliness, of disinterested kindness, of real gentility of manners, and of native mental shrewdness...as among other people.” Insisting that he treated the black congregation “exactly” as he would have treated a white church, with the “greatest possible respect,” he believed that “the gospel knows no white, no black, no rich, no poor, no bond, no free, no North, no South, no East, no West.”³⁰³ It is significant that Ryland wrote these comments in 1880, when most bonds of cross-racial fellowship in Virginia had disintegrated, and when many southern whites viewed black people with condescension or contempt.

For all his support of black rights, Ryland was still a member of the southern slaveholding class in the antebellum period. He attempted to reconcile his roles as southern master and Baptist preacher at First African, accommodating both slaveholders

³⁰³ Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 255, 264-65.

and black members in a delicate balance. Against his father's wishes, for instance, he decided not to sell a slave named Maria in 1845, and apparently sent her back to his father's farm to "avoid exciting prejudice" in the African Church and thus "weakening [his] power to do them good."³⁰⁴

While many of his writings thus indicate that he took much satisfaction in ministering to the black congregation, other comments express an entirely different feeling. In a letter to his second wife Betty in 1850, Ryland callously mentioned that he "preached 2 good sermons to the 'niggers' on Sunday."³⁰⁵ After stepping down from his post at First African at the close of the Civil War, he wrote his sister that it was "more congenial" to him to preach to whites than to blacks; the latter he "did from a sense of duty," while the former had some "present enjoyment" as he was "thrown occasionally into agreeable society."³⁰⁶ In 1868, he admitted to his son that he found teaching at a female school in Kentucky more agreeable than "trying to beat some sense into the brains of the negroes."³⁰⁷ Ryland's sense of fellowship with black Christians clearly had its limits, and he apparently shepherded them as a sometimes reluctant, even vexed paternalist. Henry Brown, who sang in the choir at First African before escaping to Philadelphia, described the pastor as a "zealous supporter of the slave-holders' cause," and went so far as to say that Ryland had "no notion whatever of the pure religion of Jesus Christ."³⁰⁸ Yet this complex, self-contradictory minister, who waxed hot and cold

³⁰⁴ Robert Ryland to Josephine Ryland, Jul. 11, 1845; see also Robert Ryland to Josiah Ryland, Jan. 4, 1842, Robert Ryland Papers.

³⁰⁵ Robert Ryland to Betty Ryland, Aug. 19, 1850, Letters to Betty Ryland, Robert Ryland Papers.

³⁰⁶ Robert Ryland to unidentified sister, Nov. 5, 1866, Letters to Sisters, Robert Ryland Papers.

³⁰⁷ Robert Ryland to Norvell Ryland, Oct. 24, 1868, Letters to Son Norby, Robert Ryland Papers.

³⁰⁸ Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, 1851 ed., 32; Spencer, "Henry Box Brown" in *Encyclopedia Virginia* online. Strangely, in the 1849 edition of his narrative, Brown states that, upon converting, he was "received into the Baptist Church by a minister who thought it was wicked to hold slaves" but did not identify this clergyman. If Brown joined First African upon his conversion, Ryland

regarding black men and women, did enable the members of First African to maintain a significant level of independence.

While Ryland preached, baptized, and supervised meetings, the thirty black deacons—elected by the “whole body of the church”—directed the disciplinary cases, financial affairs, and a host of other operations at the church.³⁰⁹ The Board of Deacons, or the “ruling element of the Church,” as Ryland described them, generally met at the beginning of every month. White members of the Superintending Committee would sometimes attend these meetings and sometimes not. According to historian Charles Irons, the “logistical inefficiency” of the white committee, along with its “partially sympathetic membership,” resulted in a rather loose hold on church affairs.³¹⁰ Ryland was regularly in attendance, however, and he recorded the meeting minutes.³¹¹ The deacons were almost exclusively free men, and they acted as liaisons between the black members and whites in the surrounding community.

Of all the deacons at First African, none appears more often in the church records than Gilbert Hunt. Long before the founding of First African, Hunt was a well-known figure among blacks and whites in the city. Born around 1780 in King William County,

would probably have been the one to baptize him. Charles Stearns, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown...* (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849), 40, available online at DocSouth, added 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html> (accessed Sept. 14, 2012).

³⁰⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 3, 1841, Nov. 3, 1844. The original black deacons were Simon Bailey, Wilson Morris, William Caswell, Isham Ellis, John Taylor, Gilbert Hunt, Isaac Turner, Robert Sprigs, Norbone Barker, William Scott, John Green, Henry Moore, Archibald Gwathmey, Lewis Allen, John Kinney, Humphrey Osborn, Ampley Williams, Robert Wilson, James Oliver, Archibald Hill, William Kinney, Thomse E. Allen, Joseph Abrahams, Stephen Kemp, Royal Allen, Elisha Hawkins, Wallace Carter, Carter Page, John Allen, and Daniel White. Pleasant Price’s name was added to this list at an unknown date. Black leaders also served as church treasurers, such as John Kinney, elected in 1845. First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Feb. 2, 1845.

³¹⁰ Irons, “And All These Things,” 29.

³¹¹ Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 254; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1,” 263-64; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 10, 1841. Ryland’s role in recording the minutes undoubtedly lends bias to that chronicle, but the minutes still offer a remarkable wealth of information about the church’s operations.

he moved to Richmond to work as a carriage-maker for his master's son-in-law, and later worked as blacksmith there under a different master. On December 26, 1811, Hunt became a local hero when, upon returning from a service at First Baptist, he helped rescue a dozen people from the flames of the Richmond Theater fire. This disaster claimed the lives of seventy-two people, including Virginia's governor and the president of the Bank of Virginia.³¹² Hunt again served the city during the War of 1812, when he mounted cannon for Richmond's defenses and manufactured other equipment for the army. He later joined the city's volunteer fire brigade and helped save the lives of a large number of prisoners at a fire in the state penitentiary in 1823.³¹³

After purchasing his freedom for \$800 and receiving a letter of dismissal from the First Baptist Church to move to Africa, Hunt sailed to Liberia in 1829.³¹⁴ He spent several months exploring the colony and regions farther from the coast, but the fifty-year-old Hunt returned home later that year.³¹⁵ He described Liberia in "less than flattering terms" and drew fire from a local colonization official who accused him of discouraging other blacks from moving there.³¹⁶

³¹² Philip Barrett, *Gilbert Hunt, The City Blacksmith* (Richmond, VA: James Woodhouse, 1859), 20-31, available online at DocSouth, added 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/barrett/barrett.html> (accessed May 14, 2010); Marie Tyler-McGraw and Gregg D. Kimball, *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Valentine Museum, 1988), 54-58.

³¹³ Barrett, *Gilbert Hunt*, 9-11; Tyler-McGraw, *In Bondage and Freedom*, 56.

³¹⁴ Barrett, *Gilbert Hunt*, 18, 12-16; Tyler-McGraw, *In Bondage and Freedom*, 56; First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 15, 1829.

³¹⁵ Barrett, 12-16; Tyler-McGraw, *In Bondage and Freedom*, 56.

³¹⁶ Marie Tyler-McGraw, "Richmond Free Blacks and African Colonization, 1816-1832," *Journal of American Studies* 21 (Aug. 1987), 207-24, quotation on 221.



Gilbert Hunt (c. 1780-1863), deacon at First African Baptist Church, Richmond
Photograph courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Collection, Special Collections,
The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia

By 1841, the aging blacksmith had long since won a formidable reputation among residents of the city, and the black members of First African elected him to serve as a deacon of the new congregation. No stranger to drama, Hunt faced a variety of criticisms from black members under his leadership. In 1842, after quarreling with another member, Hunt resigned his office with the approval of a majority of members. Pastor Ryland expressed his “decided disapprobation” of Hunt’s removal, but the deacons proceeded to accept the resignation anyway.³¹⁷ Hunt apparently worked his way back into the church’s favor, however; the congregation voted to reinstate him as deacon two years later.³¹⁸

Yet over the next several years, Hunt’s troubles with the church continued. When he seemed to side with white leaders during a controversy concerning the church property in 1849, he again alienated many of the black members. By this point, First African had

³¹⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 2, 30, 1842; Jan. 1, 1843.

³¹⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 24, 1844.

raised enough money to purchase the deed to their building from the First Baptist Church. The black deacons chose three free black members and two whites to serve as trustees. Questioning the lawfulness of black trustees, Ryland consulted Virginia's attorney general, Sidney Baxter, about the matter. Baxter asserted that it would be "inexpedient" to engage black trustees, who might "endanger" the title to the property. It is striking that Ryland had to solicit the advice of such a high official to understand a law that today is cited as unambiguous in its oppressiveness and pervasive in its compass; moreover, Baxter did not explicitly state that appointing black trustees was illegal, only "inexpedient." Nevertheless, a cautious Ryland recommended that the deacons reconsider their selection. The deacons refused, however, and "resolved" to maintain their appointments.³¹⁹

Still holding the title to the building, First Baptist informed the black church that it would not convey the deed unless the black leaders submitted to the attorney general's counsel. After a "long discussion," and refusing to "admit the necessity of such restriction," the black members agreed to withdraw the appointments of black trustees to "avoid all farther...collision." Ryland noted that "much confusion & disorder prevailed" during this meeting.³²⁰ At a meeting the following month, Ryland read a letter from the white leaders of First Baptist communicating that they had turned over the deed to the building and that their insistence on white trustees had been solely in the interest of the "perpetual benefit" of the black congregation.³²¹ At the same meeting, a group of black lay members charged Gilbert Hunt with surreptitiously obtaining the signatures of fifteen black deacons to support First Baptist's restriction on the deed. In doing this, they said,

³¹⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 12, Dec. 4, 1848; Feb. 4, 1849.

³²⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 1, 1849.

³²¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 6, Dec. 16, 1849; May 5, 1850.

Hunt had disregarded the “regular proceedings” of the church and had unduly influenced the black leadership. Until Hunt could give “satisfaction” for his behavior, the church suspended him from the deaconry.³²² Seven months later, Hunt finally presented his apology, assuring the church that “he did what he did for the best,” an admission that the congregation accepted as “satisfactory.”³²³

The elderly Hunt was eventually excluded from the church, however, for “contempt of brethren” after someone charged him with “disorderly behavior” at a meeting in Petersburg in 1857. When confronted with this “error,” witnesses claimed that Hunt exhibited “unchristian conduct” and “a most unlovely temper.”³²⁴ It appears that the church once again restored Hunt to fellowship, because in 1859 the pastor admonished him for mishandling church business.³²⁵ Hunt’s fascinating life as an enslaved and later a free blacksmith, a city hero, a property owner, and a deacon in Richmond’s first all-black church reveals much about the opportunities and restrictions urban black people confronted and the conflicts that sometimes divided the black community. His tumultuous interactions with First African aptly demonstrate how the church government functioned—a dynamic give-and-take between the authority of black deacons, the influence of the black laity, and the involvement of the white pastor.

This network of deacons, lay people, and white leaders would face additional strain in other cases. In 1850, James Allison, Charles Feggins, and Stephen Brown wrote to the pastor with a complaint that free black people were given “partiality” in administering church affairs. The deacons had apparently excluded these three men,

³²² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 6, Jul. 1, Oct. 7, 1849.

³²³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 7, 1850.

³²⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 5, Sept. 6, 1857.

³²⁵ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 7, 1859.

presumably slaves, from fellowship. After Ryland unsuccessfully attempted to reconcile the two parties, he called for the aid of the white Superintending Committee, which held a meeting of the deacons and the discontented lay members. After both groups agreed to “fellowship” the other, the white leaders urged them to “bury their unkind feelings” and “endeavor to live harmoniously.”³²⁶

The only other time that the white committee intervened in a church conflict was in the case of deacon Wilson Morris in 1852. Several members testified they had heard Morris using “indecorous and abusive language” to two other deacons in the “public streets.” No doubt the church saw a black leader’s transgressions as even graver offenses when committed in public, and thus possibly in the hearing of white critics of the church. Although Morris apologized to the two other deacons, a group of 336 lay members still demanded his resignation, and a list of their names was presented at a church meeting. Based on this significant opposition to Morris, Ryland urged him to resign, but he refused. The deacons decided to put the matter to a vote, ruling 14 to 10 that Morris should stay in office as deacon. Ryland offered his protests, and upon the request of a group of deacons and lay members, he solicited the support of the white committee. Expressing “tenderness to the feelings” of Morris, the committee still advised his resignation, stating that no officer should “retain his place to the dissatisfaction of a respectable minority.” Morris finally consented to step down. Five of the deacons who

³²⁶ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 5, Jun. 16, Jul. 7, 20, Oct. 6, Nov. 17, 1850.

had supported him also resigned within a couple of months, apparently disappointed at the way the church and committee had handled the case.³²⁷

After deacon Daniel White faced an accusation of poorly handling his office in 1853 and was eventually excluded, the church actually stood firm against the recommendations of the Superintending Committee to restore him to fellowship. White invoked the aid of white committee member Richard Reins to appeal his case. The deacons voted to stand by their decision, even when Reins and another white committee member made a second appeal—this time in person—a couple months later.³²⁸ The infrequent and sometimes unsuccessful interventions of Ryland and the white committee in church controversies emphasizes the degree to which the black deacons governed independently.

Aside from preaching, Ryland's main duty as the ordained minister of First African was in baptizing new members, and the black deacons assisted by presenting and judging applicants. From its founding, First African was the largest congregation in the Dover Association, with 1,604 members in 1842 and 3,260 by 1860.³²⁹ The church frequently reported formidable annual baptism figures to the association; Ryland baptized 618 people in 1842 alone.³³⁰ In 1852, pleased with the congregation's dramatic growth, Ryland made a note in the church minute book that he had baptized 2,001 people since becoming pastor there.³³¹

³²⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 2, Jun. 6, 13, 20, Jul. 18, 25, Nov. 14, 1852. Deacons James Oliver, John Kinney, Royall Allen, Robert Spriggs, and Pleasant Price resigned on August 4 and September 5, 1852.

³²⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 19, 1853; Mar. 2, May 4, 1856.

³²⁹ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1842*, 3-4; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 23-28.

³³⁰ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1842*, 3-4.

³³¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 6, 1851. In 1856, Ryland recorded that he had baptized 2,826 people into the church since 1841, First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute

In teaching this expanding body, Ryland wrote that he sought to “preach *out* of their minds...their visions and revelations, and all their long cherished superstitions,” and to inculcate “a knowledge of the great facts of their religion.”³³² When, contrary to Ryland’s “admonition,” an enslaved woman named Jane Jackson “behaved very indecorously in shouting & splashing” during her baptism in 1855, he skeptically noted that he would “see how she holds out” as a member.³³³ Discouraging “hasty profession[s] of religion” among applicants for baptism, Ryland required that they be closely examined—first by one of the deacons and then by himself.³³⁴

First African received applicants for baptism, as well as applicants for admission from persons leaving other churches, at several different meetings each month. Applicants from other congregations often came from nearby counties such as Henrico, Hanover, and Chesterfield, as well as from urban areas across the state.³³⁵ The church minutes frequently neglected to mention the names of the masters of enslaved applicants. On July 10, 1842, for instance, many of the new members’ names were followed by question marks, indicating that the person recording their names—possibly Ryland himself—may not even have known whether they were free or enslaved, and that he certainly had no idea who the masters of the latter might be.³³⁶ According to Ryland’s history, each enslaved applicant was supposed to bring a “testimonial” of good conduct

Book, Oct. 5, 1856. In 1880, Ryland stated that 3,832 people had been baptized into the church between 1841 and 1865. Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 262.

³³² Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 255; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1,” 264-65.

³³³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 15, 1855.

³³⁴ Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 262; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1,” 264-65.

³³⁵ Kimball, *American City, Southern Place*, 29. On p. 28, Kimball provides a helpful map showing common regions in Virginia from which the membership of First African drew. The most popular counties of origin were directly north and east of Richmond.

³³⁶ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 10, 1842.

from his or her master, but the church minutes do not indicate whether that happened regularly.³³⁷

In some cases, the church did interact with the masters of enslaved members. When Lucy Washington, who had been baptized in an Episcopal church, wanted to join First African in 1844, her master objected to her “rebaptism,” insisting that the first baptism was an “act of obedience to God.” The African church, “after expressing some scruples,” voted to receive her.³³⁸ Several years later, slaveholder Harriet Palmer wrote to the church complaining that Ryland had baptized one of her slaves without her permission. The enslaved woman had apparently “placed herself among the candidates & was baptized clandestinely without ever being received for baptism or making any oral confession.” The church declared that she was not a member and promised to report this determination to Palmer.³³⁹ This incident, like the paucity of masters’ names in baptismal records, seems to reveal that the leaders of First African were not punctilious about securing the consent of slaveholders for slave baptisms.

Yet the disciplining of enslaved members at First African did support slaveholders’ authority from time to time. Maria Robinson, for example, was cited for “improper behavior to her mistress” in 1845.³⁴⁰ The majority of the hundreds of discipline cases at the church, however, dealt with adultery and fighting. Ryland made careful notes on the adultery issue; of the 317 people excluded from 1841 to 1847, two hundred of them were disciplined for adultery.³⁴¹ In one intriguing case, David Allen and

³³⁷ Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 1,” 264-65.

³³⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 7, 1844.

³³⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 5, 1851.

³⁴⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 2, 1845.

³⁴¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 6, 1847; in 1857, Ryland noted that in the previous ten years, 265 out of 400 exclusions were for adultery. First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 3, 1857.

his wife charged each other with “unfaithfulness & disreputable disease.” He presented a “certificate of good character” from his master, while she presented a clean medical report from a doctor. After the deacons asked Ryland to consult the doctor, the case was indefinitely postponed.³⁴²

Church leaders would sometimes sympathize in special cases, such as that of Peter Kelly, who married a woman whose husband was still alive. When the deacons discovered that she had been separated from her husband for several years because of his maltreatment of and unfaithfulness to her, and viewing Peter Kelly as a member in good standing, they voted to retain him in membership.³⁴³ In order to better supervise the marriages in the congregation, the deacons ruled in 1848 that free members “living together as man & wife” should obtain a license from the county clerk and be married by a “regularly authorized minister.”³⁴⁴ It appears that black leaders were permitted to solemnize marriages in the congregation because, in 1845, Richard Vaughan—who apparently was a deacon—was cited for attempting to wed Molly Randolph to a married man. The church dropped the charges after Vaughan convinced them that he did not know the man already had a wife.³⁴⁵

As in other churches, First African’s deacons spent a substantial amount of time intervening in domestic disputes, some of them violent. When Martha Harris refused to live with her husband because the house was “not comfortable,” her husband Abraham was ordered to “make it so,” and two leaders were dispatched to “judge of its

³⁴² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 4, 1846.

³⁴³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 2, Apr. 3, 1842.

³⁴⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 5, 1848.

³⁴⁵ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Feb. 9, Apr. 6, 1845. For more on Richard Vaughan, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp. 75-76, and pp. 152, 190 and 222-23 of this chapter.

comfortableness.”³⁴⁶ In a more serious case, the church excluded slave James Griffin for attempting to poison his wife.³⁴⁷ In 1859, the well-known black preacher John Jasper was cited for leaving his wife, who was apparently threatening to kill him. The church forbade him to marry again.³⁴⁸ When Betsy Ann Davis was tried for “persistently slandering her husband & Delia Baker,” she became enraged, struck Baker “a furious blow,” and had to be forcibly removed. Following her exclusion, the clerk labeled her “a virago” in the church minutes.³⁴⁹ Conflicts sometimes involved members of households other than spouses. The church cited Lomax B. Smith for whipping his mother-in-law (and, at the same trial, for “playing on a musical instrument for a military company”).³⁵⁰

In addition to supervising the discipline of members, the deacons at First African directed the church’s budget. This involved collecting offerings each week to pay church expenses—primarily the pastor’s salary—as well as promoting special projects and engaging in fundraising. Even in a congregation of more than a thousand members, raising \$500 a year to pay Ryland sometimes proved challenging, especially since a large fraction of the members were enslaved. Yet black churches were not the only ones facing this difficulty. In 1841, the Dover Association reported that only twelve pastors out of its thirty-four churches were fully supported by their congregations. The other pastors received partial support, some of them a “mere trifle.”³⁵¹

When his salary was not paid on time, Ryland attempted to lighten the burden during First African’s early years. He offered to accept a smaller salary, but the deacons

³⁴⁶ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 5, 1852.

³⁴⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 4, 1842.

³⁴⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 7, 1859.

³⁴⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 6, 1859.

³⁵⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 5, 1843.

³⁵¹ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1841*, 10.

voted not to reduce it.³⁵² The minutes for the following year report that Ryland was punctually paid each quarter.³⁵³ The church apparently continued to pay him faithfully, the pastor only rarely giving a “gentle hint” that his payment was tardy.³⁵⁴ In his history of the church, Ryland remembered that the black congregation never required outside aid from white churches to pay his salary.³⁵⁵ He also discussed how a church with so many enslaved members managed to raise these funds. The free members, often “good mechanics, waiters, and drivers,” had regular wages to contribute. The slaves offered money they had earned from performing extra work. Ryland mentioned that his own slaves sometimes asked for money instead of new clothes. Finally, Ryland was “happy to say” that some masters gave their slaves money exclusively for the church.³⁵⁶

The members of First African evidently gave generously to a variety of causes. When enslaved member Thomas Allen expressed a desire to become a missionary to Africa in 1843, the church agreed to help him purchase his freedom and asked him to solicit aid in other cities in Virginia as well.³⁵⁷ Exhibiting evangelical goals the church’s members shared with whites, their offering plates also helped fund white-led evangelical organizations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention for Home Missions.³⁵⁸ Occasionally, the congregation differed with the pastor over how to allocate church funds. In 1845, when Ryland asked the deacons to reconsider their decision not to give money collected during communion to the poor, they “refused,” indicating that the

³⁵² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 6, 1844; Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church, 270.

³⁵³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 5, 1845; Oct. 4, 1846.

³⁵⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 7, 1851.

³⁵⁵ “Origin of the First African Church,” 251; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” *American Baptist Memorial* 15 (Nov. 1855), 321.

³⁵⁶ “Origin of the First African Church,” 271-72.

³⁵⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 5, 1843; Apr. 6, 1845. For more on Allen’s case, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp. 281-82.

³⁵⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 6, Feb. 17, 1856.

congregation held significant control over the budget.³⁵⁹ At other points, however, the church gave sizeable donations to the poor and even organized a Poor Saints Fund in 1848.³⁶⁰ By the late 1850s, the church was collecting more than \$2,000 a year, earmarking the money for church costs, Ryland's salary, poor relief, association contributions, and foreign missions.³⁶¹

Besides the offerings collected during services, the church also brought in money by hosting fundraising events and renting out the meeting hall. Owing \$200 for building repairs in 1848, the congregation invited First African's well-known choir to hold a concert to eliminate the debt.³⁶² Earlier that year, several deacons had been appointed to "let out the House to the citizens for public meetings" at a rate of \$12 per night.³⁶³ Remembering their Baptist convictions, the members later resolved not to rent the building for "theatric exhibitions" or public concerts.³⁶⁴ Various meetings of social organizations and community events took place at the African church over the next couple of decades, including a Fourth of July celebration, the irony of which in a land of slavery baffled Swedish traveler Frederika Bremer in 1851.³⁶⁵ The Whig and Democratic parties even held their state conventions in the black Baptist meeting house.³⁶⁶ On one

³⁵⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 5, 1845.

³⁶⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 4, 1848. See also Mar. 3, 1850; Jan. 5, 1851; Dec. 31, 1852; May 7, 1854; May 4, 1856.

³⁶¹ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1858*, 8-12; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1859*, 14-19; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, front matter—financial report for Sept. 11, 1859. First African's participation in benevolent causes is also studied in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

³⁶² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 6, 1848; Irons, "And All These Things," 30.

³⁶³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 1, 1848.

³⁶⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 4, 1849.

³⁶⁵ Frederika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 2: 535, cited in Kimball, *American City, Southern Place*, 37, see also 45-46.

³⁶⁶ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 6, 1848; see also Feb. 6, 1848. As a further irony, Richmond whites assembled in First African's sanctuary in January 1861 to nominate

occasion, some of these guests demonstrated their contempt for the church; after a political meeting in 1851, the choir noticed that someone had broken into the loft and defaced their books.³⁶⁷

This perhaps unusual expression of hostility notwithstanding, the church garnered enough support in the city to launch a building campaign in the late 1850s. Five black deacons formed a committee to decide on the “cost & arrangement” of the new edifice.³⁶⁸ The choir held concerts to help raise money, including one for white people to attend and offer donations; apparently such concerts attracted sizeable white audiences.³⁶⁹ On Sunday, May 30, 1858, the church held a formal dedication for the new building, again with a separate ceremony for whites in the afternoon.³⁷⁰

Throughout the antebellum years, the expanding membership of the semi-autonomous First African Church was on display before the citizens of Richmond, white and black. From time to time, prominent (or at least vociferous) whites criticized the church’s operations, and local courts meted out criminal punishments to congregants who got into trouble with the law. First African’s interaction with the city’s judicial system further highlights the dichotomy of independence and self-restraint that marked this congregation. When young William Jackson was publicly whipped for theft in 1848, the church evaluated his case separately from the civil courts. The congregation listened to his defense—that he had “bought innocently a cloak which proved to have been stolen”—and considering his youth and poverty, the church excused him as a “subject

representatives to Virginia’s secession convention. *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, Jan. 30, 1861, cited in Kimball, *American City, Southern Place*, 228.

³⁶⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 5, 1851.

³⁶⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 4, 1857.

³⁶⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 1, Dec. 6, 1857; Feb. 7, 1858.

³⁷⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 2, 1858.

calling for charity.” They did note that Jackson “should be cautioned by the Pastor”; the congregation probably was concerned that Jackson had brought negative attention to the church.³⁷¹ In a similar case, George Green stood before the church court for theft after receiving punishment from the civil courts. The church acquitted him of the charges.³⁷²

Ryland and the congregation fell under serious scrutiny in 1848 when the church was linked to a mailing network of escaped slaves. For years, First African had operated as hub of correspondence: letters would arrive for members from friends and family scattered all over the country. On various Sundays, Ryland would announce a mail call and distribute the letters at the end of the service. Rumors began to circulate in the city that some of these mailings were from fugitive slaves, “detailing the manner of their escape” to their loved ones back in Richmond. To make matters worse, a “notorious convict,” recently released from the state penitentiary, exposed a link between First African and escaped slaves. This man, who was engaging in the “double work” of assisting runaways and then revealing their whereabouts to their masters for payment, tried to direct suspicion away from himself by claiming that a person of “high character...that lived a little out of town to the west of the city”—alluding to Rev. Ryland—acted as the “mainspring in these secret operations.” Though unwitting, Ryland had apparently distributed letters from several of the people whom this convict had helped to escape. The man was sent back to the state prison for a second sentence, but his attempt to frame Ryland no doubt cast increased suspicion on the pastor and congregation.³⁷³

³⁷¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 28, 1848.

³⁷² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 4, 1853.

³⁷³ Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” 323.

Ryland was distressed to learn that “a few” (Ryland’s emphasis) congregants at First African had so “abused [his] confidence” by corresponding with fugitives, causing him to “desecrate the pastoral office” and violate the law. As a result, Ryland resolved to distribute mail only to trusted recipients and to leave the rest of the letters at the post office. Yet when angry locals demanded that he read all the letters sent to the church and disclose escape plots to the police, Ryland was “mortified.” Considering it an equal degradation of his office to pursue runaway slaves, he refused and declared it his singular duty to “preach the gospel and watch for souls.” Faced with heightened criticism from the community, the church learned a “lesson of caution” from this incident.³⁷⁴

An even greater scandal threatened the church a few years later when members Jane and John Williams were accused of brutally murdering their master’s family, the Winstons. The outraged city was “thrown into the most intense excitement,” and accusing fingers pointed at the black church, labeled by one Richmond publication as a “cradle of crime—where the seeds of robbery, arson, and murder were sown.”³⁷⁵ The author of this article clamored for the church’s closing, insisting that blacks should attend white churches and be forbidden to congregate anywhere in groups larger than five.³⁷⁶ Convinced of the Williamses’ guilt and eager to rid the church of such a connection, the deacons excluded the couple, even though Ryland believed that John might have been innocent of the crime.³⁷⁷ Both husband and wife were executed later that year.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁴ Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” 323-24.

³⁷⁵ Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” 324; *Richmond Republican*, Jul. 30, 1852, cited in William A. Link, “The Jordan Hatcher Case: Politics and a ‘Spirit of Insubordination’ in Antebellum Virginia,” *Journal of Southern History* 64 (Nov. 1998), 645.

³⁷⁶ *Richmond Republican*, Jul. 30, 1852.

³⁷⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, July 25, 1852; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” 324.

³⁷⁸ Link, “Jordan Hatcher Case,” 645.

In response to attacks launched against First African, the pastors of three white Baptist churches in the city, including Jeremiah Jeter, adopted several resolutions in defense of Ryland and the religious instruction of blacks. Assuring the public of their respect for the “rights of masters and the laws of the land,” they urged citizens to support the church in its efforts to minister to blacks. They endorsed Ryland with “undiminished confidence” as an “upright and honorable citizen” who was well qualified for such a “difficult and important post.”³⁷⁹ Ironically, assurances that supervised instruction would preserve order among slaves helped to preserve this semi-autonomous body of blacks from elimination.

Ryland faced yet another scandal in 1857, when an anonymous writer lambasted him in a Richmond newspaper, *The South*, published by the fiery proslavery Democrat Roger A. Pryor. The article, titled “Beware of Traitors,” accused Ryland of “sowing the seed of Abolitionism” among his students at Richmond College. According to the author, Ryland’s supposed “veneration” for the writings of Francis Wayland, a New England Baptist scholar who opposed slavery on moral grounds, was one example of his “fiendish purposes” as president of the school.³⁸⁰ Richmond Baptist leaders acted quickly to refute this attack. After investigating the charges, the Trustees of Richmond College deemed them false and offered their full support to Ryland. Calling the accusations an “atrocious slander,” the Baptist *Religious Herald* published a “Vindication of President Ryland,” and the *Daily Dispatch* defended him as a man of “moderation,

³⁷⁹ “Religious Instruction for Colored People,” resolutions dated Oct. 17, 1852, in Robert Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Church, No. 3,” *American Baptist Memorial* 15 (Nov. 1855), 325-27. See also *Religious Herald*, Nov. 11, 1852.

³⁸⁰ *The South*, Dec. 12, 1857. The Dec. 12, 1857 is actually missing from the LVA’s microfilm reel containing *The South*, but a labeled copy of this article can be found in the Ryland papers at VBHS.

conservatism, and fidelity...a true patriot.”³⁸¹ Although a slaveholder, Ryland clearly was viewed with suspicion by certain residents of the city. His involvement with the black congregation no doubt played a central part in generating their mistrust, evincing the complexity of the man, the church, and the city itself.

Along with Ryland, the Superintending Committee and Board of Deacons at First African sought to protect the church’s reputation in the face of such controversy.

Following the Williams murder case in 1852, the white committee requested that Ryland explain to the congregation the state law that restricted black assemblies and “kindly urg[e]” the members to stop meeting at the church after worship was dismissed.³⁸² A few months later, after receiving complaints that black members were crowding the sidewalks in front of the church after services, Ryland reminded the congregation that the police would probably intervene if they continued to linger outside the building.³⁸³

Despite the admonitions of white leaders, the black deacons frequently held unauthorized meetings. In 1859, Ryland complained that they were often absent from the regular worship service. They explained that because of the “increased stringency in police regulations,” it was “dangerous” for them to meet at night, and therefore they were forced to gather on the Sabbath during part of the service to conduct church business. Ryland noted in the minutes that he “appreciated their explanation.”³⁸⁴ This significant exchange reveals crucial points about the black church’s autonomy and its relationship with Ryland. The deacons had continued to meet independently despite the urging of the

³⁸¹ “The Minutes of the Trustees of Richmond College,” Dec. 15 and 22, 1857, in University of Richmond Trustees Minutes, 1841-1917, 207-11, on microfilm at VBHS; *Religious Herald*, Dec. 17, Dec. 24, 1852; *Daily Dispatch*, Dec. 29, 1857.

³⁸² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Sept. 5, 1852.

³⁸³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 31, 1852.

³⁸⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 2, 1859.

white committee several years earlier, and apparently, white city officials had not intervened to stop the meetings. Ryland's response demonstrated sympathy for the black deacons' frustrations, indicating that he was more interested in guarding the church's reputation than in actually obeying the law. And finally, the black deacons certainly understood that enforcement of state and city laws went through periods of tightening and loosening, and they used that understanding both to guard the church and to exercise autonomy.

When it came to the state's ban on black preaching and exhorting, which had been in place since 1832, the black deacons and pastor Ryland seem to have followed their own set of rules. In 1845, for instance, the church licensed deacon Elisha Hawkins to "exercise his gift in public speaking wherever Providence may open a door for him."³⁸⁵ The church sometimes licensed members who were preparing to move overseas as missionaries, such as Boston Drayton, who was given a license and an elaborate commissioning ceremony before a "crowded and deeply affected audience" in 1847.³⁸⁶ Unlike Drayton, however, it does not appear that Hawkins had made plans to leave the church, since he was recorded as a committee member in the minutes a year later.³⁸⁷ The church leaders exercised their own authority over a variety of public speakers, forbidding members to "officiate at funerals or other religious meetings without first obtaining the sanction of the church" in 1850—a ruling that shows that blacks probably were

³⁸⁵ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 4, 1845.

³⁸⁶ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 16, 30, Jun. 6, 1847. For more on Boston Drayton, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation, p. 282.

³⁸⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 21, 1846; see Chapter 1 of this dissertation, p. 53, for a discipline case involving Elisha Hawkins at First Baptist in 1833.

officiating at such functions already, some without authorization but others with the church's endorsement.³⁸⁸

The pastor and deacons seemed far more concerned with the doctrinal content of black preaching than its legality. When John Jasper presented the leaders with a letter inviting him to preach at a church in Petersburg in 1855, they “commend[ed] him to the confidence of the Petersburg brethren without assuming any other responsibility.”³⁸⁹ A couple of years later, however, the church did assume responsibility for his preaching and declared his “doctrines in regard to Satan” unscriptural.³⁹⁰ Despite state legislation, Jasper was an enormously popular slave preacher among blacks and whites in Virginia. According to biographers, his “fiery and thrilling” preaching was in high demand in and around Richmond and Petersburg, refuting the notion that the laws of 1832 put an end to black religious oratory.³⁹¹ Apparently, many Virginians were willing to completely ignore the laws in order to hear such a celebrated speaker.

Ryland not only allowed members of the congregation to assist him in leading worship; he encouraged it. Making some attempt to keep the services lawful, he did not allow blacks to enter the pulpit, but as a “recompense for this slight,” he called on many “colored preachers” and “ministers of respectable gifts” to pray publicly at each service. These prayers were often marked by “great fervency and power,” and provided the “highest degree of comfort” to both listener and speaker alike, constituting at least a

³⁸⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 6, 1850.

³⁸⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 7, 1855.

³⁹⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 2, Feb. 7, 1858.

³⁹¹ William E. Hatcher, *John Jasper: The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 36-46, quotation on 38, available online at DocSouth, added 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/hatcher/hatcher.html> (accessed Nov. 17, 2012). See also E[dwin]. A[rcher]. Randolph, *The Life of Rev. John Jasper, Pastor of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia...* (Richmond: R.T. Hill & Co., 1884), 12-25, available online at DocSouth, added 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jasper/jasper.html> (accessed Nov. 17, 2012).

partial circumvention of the law barring black preaching.³⁹² One of the most popular of these orators was deacon Joseph Abrams. According to Ryland, Abrams had been licensed and ordained by First Baptist Church before 1832. Even under the post-Turner legislation, he “enjoyed the confidence of the citizens” and “was tolerated in preaching funerals at private houses.” Ryland sometimes asked him to offer an exhortation to close the worship service, admitting that Abrams was “heard with far more interest” than himself.³⁹³ Upon Abrams’s death in 1854, the church took up a collection to erect a monument in his honor.³⁹⁴ More than eight thousand people, both black and white, reportedly attended his funeral, with some fifty carriages taking part in one of the largest processions in Richmond’s history.³⁹⁵

While speakers like Abrams were generally well regarded in the church, one actually drew negative attention from another member. In 1855, James Oliver complained that whenever he was called on to pray before the congregation, Sophy Henderson would make “unkind remarks” and walk out in protest. When Henderson was brought before the deacons, she insisted that God had informed her that Oliver was a hypocrite, and that she was obeying God’s command by refusing to listen to Oliver pray. Concluding that she was “bordering on insanity,” the deacons gently admonished her—

³⁹² Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” 258-59; Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” 322.

³⁹³ Robert Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 3,” 354. Ryland also discussed black deacons Simon Bailey, Archibald Gwathmey, and John Taylor in this issue, 354-55.

³⁹⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 5, 1854; Kimball, *American City, Southern Place*, 51; Tyler-McGraw, *In Bondage and Freedom*, 37. For more information on Abrams’s life, see John T. O’Brien, “Joseph Abrams,” in John T. Kneebone et al., eds., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography, Vol. 1* (Richmond, VA: Library of Virginia, 1998), 13-14.

³⁹⁵ Robert Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Baptist Church, No. 4,” *American Baptist Memorial* 15 (Dec. 1855), 354; *Dispatch*, Jun. 7, 1854, cited in Virginius Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990 [orig. pub. 1976]), 155; O’Brien, “Joseph Abrams.”

they “pitied more than censured” her—and dismissed the case.³⁹⁶ Oliver’s conflict with Henderson further demonstrates how active blacks were in leading religious gatherings at First African.

Across the city and throughout the state, black and white Baptists looked to First African as a model for separate black worship. Similar bodies increasingly took root in the late antebellum period. In 1845, with the support of the black members, leaders at Second Baptist Church in Richmond began making plans to form a black church with a government like that of First African. Fifty-seven black members, “ready & willing” to adopt the proposed constitution, were dismissed to join the new church in 1846, which the Dover Association then admitted.³⁹⁷ By 1860, the congregation of more than a thousand members was raising money to pay off the cost of its meeting house.³⁹⁸

A third African church in Richmond, Ebenezer Baptist, emerged as a “colony” from First African during the 1850s. First African organized an all-day ceremony in May 1858, attended by blacks and whites, to dedicate the new church, with festivities led by Robert Ryland and First African’s celebrated choir. A couple of months after the dedication, Rev. Jeremiah Jeter proposed that the new congregation adapt and incorporate the constitution and by-laws of First African, and Ebenezer’s members consented.³⁹⁹ A committee of ten whites was appointed by Grace Street Baptist Church, as well as ten

³⁹⁶ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Oct. 7, Nov. 4, 1855.

³⁹⁷ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 27, Apr. 25, Jun. 26, Jul. 24, 27, Nov. 27, Dec. 22, 1845, quotation on Nov. 27; Jan. 22, Feb. 1, 1846; Apr. 23, 1848; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1846*, 6; *The History and Chronology of Second Baptist Church...1846-1996* ([Richmond, VA: Second Baptist Church], 1996), LVA.

³⁹⁸ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 22, 1860, Jan. 12, 1862. See also *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1849*, 23.

³⁹⁹ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, 1858-1876, front matter, Jul. 17, 1858, LVA; “One Hundredth Anniversary of Ebenezer Baptist Church,” [Richmond, VA: Ebenezer Baptist Church, 1958], 6-7, LVA. For First African’s involvement in the establishment of this church, see First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jul. 6, Dec. 7, 1856; May 2 and Jul. 4, 1858.

black deacons, including John Adams, one of the state's most prominent free black property owners.⁴⁰⁰ The white committee nominated William Lindsay as pastor, and the deacons unanimously elected him.⁴⁰¹ Identifying this church as "Third African," the Dover Association incorporated it in September 1858.⁴⁰²

Like First African, this congregation sometimes rented out its hall for concerts, and members regularly contributed money to eliminate the debt on the meeting house, which Robert Ryland had purchased for them in his own name. Black leaders finished paying him the balance of the debt, around \$8,000, in 1862.⁴⁰³ The deacons regularly disciplined members and took care to maintain a positive reputation in the community. In 1863, for instance, Absalom Allen was charged with "committing a deed which carried him before the Mayor." The church expelled him a month later specifically for theft, but soon restored him.⁴⁰⁴ The deacons made a point of emphasizing the public nature of Allen's offense and punishment; if members had been "carried before the Mayor" with any frequency, the church might have found it difficult to maintain the approval of whites in Richmond.

After blacks at the biracial Leigh Street Baptist Church in Richmond began receiving separate instruction on Sunday afternoons in 1857, the congregation's white leaders decided to organize a church for them. Due to the purported "backwardness" of some of the black members, the establishment of Fourth African was postponed until

⁴⁰⁰ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 18, 25, 1858; "One Hundredth Anniversary of Ebenezer Baptist Church," 6-7; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 157-58.

⁴⁰¹ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 25, 1858; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 7, 1858.

⁴⁰² *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1858*, 13.

⁴⁰³ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 15, 1858; Jan. 12 and Jul. 13, 1862; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 161-62.

⁴⁰⁴ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 13, 1863; Jan, Feb. 14, 1864.

1859.⁴⁰⁵ According to Dover's records, this church did not have a regular white pastor, but whites from Leigh Street attended the services of the black congregation, which met in the basement.⁴⁰⁶ When whites complained that singing during the blacks' business meetings often interrupted their communion ceremonies, the black leaders agreed to suspend such celebrations during these meetings.⁴⁰⁷ Additionally, certain whites at Leigh Street became concerned about the legality of the black services, and in 1861, a church committee queried a state attorney for his opinion. The committee soon reported that the law was "not specific as to the number," and the black congregation continued meeting.⁴⁰⁸

First African's success inspired the founding of similar churches in other parts of Virginia as well, and the Richmond congregation offered support to some of those black congregations. Leaders held special collections to fund the meeting houses of "brethren" and "friends" in Petersburg, Williamsburg, Fredericksburg, Staunton, Lynchburg; they even did the same for black congregations as far outside Virginia as Philadelphia and Detroit.⁴⁰⁹ First African also collected money for Wynn's Church, a mixed-race body in Hanover County, Virginia, to help enlarge their building to accommodate black members, who presumably were seated in a separate section.⁴¹⁰ When First African's budget became tight, the church did have to deny requests for aid, such as that of elder Richard

⁴⁰⁵ Leigh Street Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1873, Nov. 25, 1857, May 30, Jul. 2, Aug. 23, Sept. 19, 1858, quotation on Aug. 23; Apr. 25, Jul. 25, Sept. 20, 1859, VBHS.

⁴⁰⁶ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1859*, 14-9; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 23-8; Leigh Street Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 25, 1859; Dec. 24, 1860; Mar. 25, 1861; Jul. 27, 1863.

⁴⁰⁷ Leigh Street Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 25, 1861.

⁴⁰⁸ Leigh Street Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 24, 1860; Jan. 28, Feb. 15, 25, Mar. 25, 1861.

⁴⁰⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 1, May 6, 1849 (Staunton); May 5, 1850; Jan. 5, 1851 (Lynchburg); Feb. 1, 1852; Jun. 19, Nov. 6, 1853 (Philadelphia); Feb. 12, 1855 (Fredericksburg); Sept. 6, Oct. 7, 1855 (Williamsburg); Apr. 5, 1857 (Detroit); quotations on Apr. 1 and May 6, 1849.

⁴¹⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 4, 1856.

Vaughan of Philadelphia in 1854, presumably the same Vaughan who had been a black leader at First Baptist and First African. Vaughan had apparently moved north and was serving as a pastor of a church there.⁴¹¹ Overall, however, the generous donations and respected example of First African helped create and sustain many black congregations in the antebellum period.

Aside from the sizable and highly autonomous congregations discussed above, a few other black churches in the area broke off from mixed-race bodies shortly before the Civil War. After meeting separately for several years, the black membership of James City Baptist was formally constituted as Chickahominy Baptist in 1859 with white pastor George Richardson.⁴¹² Richardson and free black landowner Moses Moore served as delegates to the Dover Association in 1859 and 1860. Recommended by a letter from the Williamsburg African Baptist Church, where he had served as a leader and probably a preacher as well, Moore had become a member of Chickahominy early in 1859.⁴¹³ When James City excluded Richardson in 1861 for “retailing ardent spirits,” it may be that men such as Moore took over as leaders of Chickahominy.⁴¹⁴

In Portsmouth and Hampton, blacks also pushed for separate meeting spaces. After petitioning unsuccessfully for their own meeting house, black members at Portsmouth Baptist were eventually allowed to use the church’s basement and lecture room for Christmas Eve services and other meetings in the late 1850s. When the

⁴¹¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Aug. 6, 1854. See also denied requests from the First Colored Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., Dec. 3, 1854 and from a Baptist church in Liberia, Apr. 4, 1858.

⁴¹² James City Baptist Church Minute Book, 1857-1882, Nov. 21, 1857; Jan. 23, Jul. 22, Oct. 23, 1858; Mar. 26, Aug. 27, 1859, VBHS; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1859*, 12.

⁴¹³ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1859*, 14-19; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 23-28; James City Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 26, 1859; Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 307.

⁴¹⁴ James City Baptist Church Minute Book, May 26, 1861.

congregation outgrew its building in 1859, white leaders voted to build a new edifice for the black members and solicited donations from the church and the community.⁴¹⁵ With a membership of 960 blacks and only 214 whites in 1859, Hampton Baptist was probably holding separate meetings for the blacks in the 1850s. Free black member William Taylor helped organize a black Baptist church in Hampton in the 1860s and had served as a preacher to the black congregants well before that.⁴¹⁶

From Richmond to Norfolk, and in rural environments such as James City and Charles City counties, free and enslaved black Baptists gathered in their own buildings on Sundays to sing, pray, preach, take communion, give offerings, and socialize. These fellowships expanded dramatically during the antebellum period, far exceeding the growth of white membership in Baptist congregations. Black evangelicals sometimes gathered in the presence of white leaders, and sometimes without any whites present. They obeyed the state's racial code when necessary and ignored it when they could—which was fairly often. Black deacons helped to hold these communities together, making the most of the Baptist dedication to congregational sovereignty and exhibiting strong leadership under the generally nominal supervision of white Baptists.

For their part, white Baptist leaders expressed serious concerns over the religious instruction of blacks, desiring to implement a systematic campaign to control or at least to guide black religious activity. Yet they were willing, more often than not, to let black

⁴¹⁵ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 11, Jul. 11, 1851; Feb. 6, 1852; Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1879, Dec. 11, 1857; Dec. 11, 1858; Jan. 7, Mar. 11, Apr. 8, Jun. 10, Sept. 9, Oct. 7, Nov. 11, 1859; for more on Court Street Baptist Church during the Civil War, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation, pp. 306-12.

⁴¹⁶ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association... 1859*, 14-19; Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 294; Robert Francis Engs, *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 13, 76-77. For evidence of Taylor's antebellum preaching, see the *Williamsburg Virginia Gazette*, May 15, 1856.

deacons direct black churches. Like black Baptists, they followed the law when they felt it necessary, circumvented it when they thought that would better benefit the Baptist community overall, or ignored it out of simple neglect. The interactions of black and white Baptists were inconsistent and at times unpredictable, embodying tensions between black autonomy and white direction, and between resistance and accommodation on the part of blacks.

Despite the harshness of the legislation circumscribing black religious practice that followed Nat Turner's revolt, white officials often turned out not to be vigilant enforcers, and black churches and individuals proved resilient and resourceful. Black leaders such as Lewis Tucker of Norfolk, Joseph Abrams of Richmond, and James Wallis of Williamsburg found ways to carve out sovereign spaces for their fellowships in the midst of a white supremacist slaveholding society that chose not to follow all of its own rules. At the end of Civil War came freedom, and with freedom the opportunity for black Virginians to live out fully what they had practiced informally for so long. The complex antebellum interplay between black churches and white supervision served as something of a proving ground for these congregations. The Afro-Baptist traditions and communities that blacks had sustained, and that whites had allowed and sometimes encouraged to grow, would soon take on a new, independent life.

Chapter 3: “Let Us Aim to Systematize Our Benevolence”: Evangelical Reforms and Black and White Baptists in Antebellum Tidewater Virginia

At some point in the late 1840s, the Baptist Charitable Relief Society of Richmond received a sizable bequest from a free black woman named Hannah Brown. Brown had owned property near Rocketts Landing, the commercial harbor of Richmond on the James River, and she had willed it to the Relief Society, which was operated by members of the First African Baptist Church. Two of the church’s deacons, Isham Ellis and John Green, acted as trustees for the Rocketts parcel. Early in 1850, Ellis and Green, along with five other black deacons, went to investigate the condition of the property, only to learn that the house that had stood there had burned down and that the lot was “yielding nothing.”¹ The deacons ordered the trustees to sell the land, and white pastor Robert Ryland promised to help. After failing to find a buyer for more than two years, the trustees brought the will and deed to city constable Wellington Goddin, who informed them that they could not sell it, undoubtedly for legal reasons, although church records do not specify.² At this point, Ryland “took the papers” to pursue the matter. Perhaps because of his efforts, the state legislature later “passed a bill authorizing the sale,” which Ryland then asked Goddin to oversee.³

The society’s trustees directed the proceeds from Hannah Brown’s bequest to the church’s Poor Saints Fund, which assisted impoverished members.⁴ Although state-

¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930, Feb. 3 and Mar. 3, 1850, LVA. The U.S. Federal Census of 1830 lists a free black head of household named Hannah Brown living in the Jefferson Ward of Richmond, of which Rocketts Landing was a part. See W. Asbury Christian, *Richmond: Her Past and Present* (Richmond, VA: L.H. Jenkins, 1912), 57, for demographics of the Jefferson Ward.

² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 2, 1851, Dec. 31, 1852, Mar. 6, 1853. The church minutes only record a “W. Goddin,” but this was almost certainly Wellington Goddin, listed as a Richmond city constable in the U.S Federal Census of 1850. “W. Goddin” also served as a deacon at Grace Street Baptist Church during the 1850s, *Religious Herald*, Nov. 11, 1852.

³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Feb. 5, 1854.

⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 31, 1852, May 4, 1856.

imposed racial restrictions necessitated Ryland's involvement, the black trustees still held ownership of the land and decided how they would use the profits of its sale. Moreover, black leaders in the church oversaw the establishment and operations of the congregation's charitable network. Like other churches across the country during this period, First African's members increasingly launched committees, fundraisers, and other organized efforts to influence and uplift their communities.

During the antebellum years, American evangelicals in both the North and the South joined a variety of religious crusades—from temperance movements to missionary endeavors—in what later became known as the “benevolent empire.”⁵ Evangelical denominations expanded dramatically into complex institutions maintaining sizable bureaucracies that emphasized societal and ecclesiastical reforms. Even the Baptists, whose hallmark was congregational governance, sponsored many hierarchically directed groups of this kind.

In the South, this reformist mindset extended to the very foundations of the region's “peculiar” social and economic structure by upholding the system of slavery as an opportunity to win and improve the souls both of the enslaved and of their masters. As historian Mitchell Snay asserts, efforts to provide systematic religious instruction for blacks evince a “paternal stewardship typical of benevolent reform in antebellum America,” and thus actually reveal the “symmetry between American and Southern values.”⁶ John Patrick Daly likewise places the southern intellectual history of this

⁵ John W. Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise: The Work of National Evangelical Societies in the Antebellum South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 8-9; Curtis D. Johnson, *Redeeming America: Evangelicals and the Road to Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 7-8.

⁶ Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997 [orig. pub. Cambridge University Press, 1993]), 76-99, quotation on 93; see also Samuel S. Hill, Jr., *The South and the North in American Religion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 54-66, and Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in*

period in the “mainstream of discussions of both antebellum culture and the subsequent national ideological development.”⁷ In fact, the changes in southern evangelicalism in the antebellum period, particularly the increased demands to supervise black Christians, stem more from this reformist *mentalité* than from a reaction to slave revolts like that of Nat Turner.

Christianity offered blacks spiritual freedoms and held them to moral standards on something like an equal footing with whites, and, like whites, black evangelicals were often eager to take part in the reform movements that engaged their churches. The millennial zeal that swept the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century knit Christians together across denominational, sectional, and sometimes even racial boundaries in the pursuit of shared evangelical goals. Yet paradoxically, the southern reformist mindset also further exacerbated sectional and racial rifts by attempting to sanctify the practice of African servitude. Many white southerners centered their reforms upon a “sacralized” slavery; according to Snay, the “reformation of slavery” in the 1840s and 1850s—particularly improvements of masters’ treatment of slaves to “conform to the moral laws of God”—“fit neatly with the postmillennial thinking of Southern clergymen.” Daly also links the emergence of a cohesive proslavery evangelical ideology with the “massive campaign for evangelical standards of respectability.”⁸

America, 1701-1840 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 291-307. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, on the other hand, describe a widening rift between northern and southern Christians, who developed “incompatible visions of the social relations necessary to sustain Christianity in a sinful world.” Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 528-65, quotation on 565.

⁷ John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 1-2, 74, 109-110, 155-56, quotation on 155.

⁸ Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 99; Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom*, 80. According to Snay, southern ministers believed that the institution of slavery would “evolve, improve, and persist as an essential component of millennial society.” Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 99. See also Jack P. Maddex, Jr.,

Building on the same premise of the antebellum South's participation in a national ideology of individual, institutional, and social improvement, this chapter specifically ties the development of Baptists' concerns for the religious instruction of slaves and free blacks to the "massive campaign" of evangelical reform. This study of the "benevolent" writings and activities of Baptists in Tidewater Virginia expands upon Larry Tise's contention that instruction for slaves emerged as an "outgrowth of benevolence."⁹ White Baptists' repeated calls for churches to organize and improve their methods of evangelizing and training black people—occasionally even in conflict with state laws restricting blacks' religious activity and their acquisition of literacy—arose integrally alongside the promotion of temperance, ministerial education, evangelical publications, Sunday schools, African colonization of free blacks, missionary work, and charitable activities. Likewise, black men's and women's participation in the growth of such movements and societies, although sometimes on their own terms and for their own reasons, further demonstrates the extent to which the reformist outlook spread among people of both races in local churches and communities.

At the heart of antebellum reform movements was the popular belief that society would gradually improve as the "millennium" of peace and prosperity, followed by Christ's Second Coming, advanced. This eschatological framework, known as postmillennialism—which referred to the Second Coming as occurring *after* the millennium—pervaded most nineteenth-century denominations. Additionally, many American evangelicals believed that the United States was particularly chosen to speed

"Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum Southern Calvinism," *American Quarterly* 31 (Spring 1979), 46-62.

⁹ Tise, *Proslavery*, 298.

the millennium's progress and thus the advent of God's kingdom on earth. With this optimistic view of the future, postmillennialists vigorously attempted to institute morality and order in their own lives and in the lives of those around them.¹⁰

A host of transdenominational benevolent organizations were formed in England and the northeastern United States during the early nineteenth century. As John Kuykendall has noted, the "Big Five" of these institutions, which eventually spread to the southern states as well, were the American Education Society and the American Bible Society, founded in 1815 and 1816 respectively; and the American Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society, and the American Home Missionary Society, all founded during the mid-1820s.¹¹ These groups generated vast interstate networks to propagate Christian doctrine both at home and abroad by distributing evangelical literature and formalizing religious education for the clergy and the larger American public.

Alongside these educational and missionary societies emerged a variety of social welfare associations, crusading against alcohol, poverty, and prostitution, seeking reform of prisons and asylums, and, in some parts of the North, urging abolition of slavery.

Stemming from the postmillennial vision of the early nineteenth-century revival

¹⁰ Johnson, *Redeeming America*, 155-84. In the same chapter, Johnson also discusses antebellum premillennialism, a less popular but still influential view that society would progressively worsen until Christ returned. According to Johnson, black Christians, and particularly the enslaved, were generally "expectant premillennialists," believing that "God would destroy the current social order without any human assistance," most notably bringing an end to slavery. A small number of blacks, such as Nat Turner, were "revolutionary premillennialists" who saw themselves as God's "prophets" and "instruments" in the destruction of the social order. Johnson, *Redeeming America*, 174-84, quotation on 175; see also Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 223-25. The African American church records studied here, however, do not offer enough evidence to make conclusions about the eschatological views of Virginia blacks.

¹¹ Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, ix-x, xiv, 14-15; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 278-80. According to historians such as David Bailey, the "benevolent empire" took longer to develop in the South as that region had fewer transatlantic connections or interests than northern churches. David T. Bailey, *Shadow on the Church: Southwestern Evangelical Religion and the Issue of Slavery, 1783-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 203-05. See also Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, for a discussion of the South's "process of institutional maturation," 81-94, quotation on 82.

movement known as the Second Great Awakening, the establishment of these groups demonstrated what scholar Timothy Smith calls a “perfectionist aspiration”—both in “personal holiness” and public reform.¹² The temperance campaign garnered the most widespread support in both the North and the South; the leading organization of that movement, the American Temperance Society, was formed in Boston in 1826.¹³

Across the northern states, and then in the South as well, local reformers, evangelical associations, and churches established auxiliary societies to support the national reform institutions. Focusing on Christian education, missions, and temperance, Virginia Baptists created numerous such bodies in the 1820s with funding supplied from regional associations of churches.¹⁴ According to Virginia Baptist historian Reuben Alley, the church’s position changed “slowly but radically from that of individual Christian commitment in personal devotion and service to responsibility for financial contributions to a system of agencies.”¹⁵ In her study of church work in nineteenth-century Virginia, Beth Barton Schweiger connects the expansion of denominational

¹² Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 8. See also Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) and Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) for histories of antebellum social reform movements and their relationship to evangelicalism.

¹³ Ian R. Tyrrell demonstrates how “in their leadership, systematic organization, and reform at the local level, the temperance reformers of the ATS imitated techniques of evangelical benevolent reform and tapped enthusiasms cast up by the Second Great Awakening.” Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 54-79, quotation on 69. See also Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 130-58, and Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 1-29.

¹⁴ Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville, Broadman Press, 1974), 104-13. Baker lists three main Baptist benevolent societies: the General Mission Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions, founded in 1814; the Baptist General Tract Society, founded in 1824; and the American Baptist Home Mission Society, founded in 1832. Reuben Edward Alley, *A History of Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist General Board, 1973), 180-83.

¹⁵ Alley, *History of Baptists in Virginia*, 141-42. See also Charles Frederick Irons, “‘The Chief Cornerstone’: The Spiritual Foundations of Virginia’s Slave Society, 1776-1861” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2003), 96-130.

bureaucracies, the accumulation of denominational wealth, the development of “clerical professionalism,” and the push for social refinement among religious people to the rise of benevolent movements in the South.¹⁶ While the focus of evangelical activity did seem to shift outward during this period, however, many Baptists believed that personal holiness had to remain at the heart of any attempts to improve church and society—a principle shown in their continued commitment to church discipline throughout the antebellum years.¹⁷

Initially wary of religious organizations outside the local church, Baptists, along with Methodists, had traditionally fallen into the “antiformalist” camp, which focused on personal repentance and local church government as the best courses to redeem society. In contrast, the “formalists”—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians—placed a stronger emphasis on hierarchical organizations in their pursuit of millennial perfection. In general, antiformalism, like the Baptist and Methodist churches themselves, was more prevalent in southern and western regions than in the Northeast.¹⁸ As the nineteenth century progressed, however, many Baptists and Methodists began to embrace the work of larger evangelical institutions, such as those listed above, even as they launched similar programs within their own denominations.¹⁹

Regional Baptist associations, like Dover and Portsmouth in Virginia, increasingly called for their constituent churches to take collections for a variety of

¹⁶ Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 48-49; 86-87.

¹⁷ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, 12-14.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Redeeming America*, 118-19; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 175-76.

¹⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association, Held at Tappahannock, in Essex County, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday 8th, 9th and 10th October 1831* (n.p., [1831]), 10, VBHS; here Dover stated that wherein Baptists agreed with other denominations, they could “combine with them in pious and benevolent societies for the good of the human family.”

causes, and they published periodic updates applauding the efforts of benevolent institutions. In 1830, Portsmouth asked its churches to report annually the activities of the Bible, tract (aimed at publishing and distributing evangelical literature), missionary, and temperance societies, that they supported, as well as providing reports on their respective Sunday schools, if they had one.²⁰ Proper organization and record-keeping were considered crucial. By the late 1840s, the Dover Baptist Association's Foreign Missions Committee was exhorting its listeners, "Let us aim to systematize our benevolence."²¹ A few years later, Dover recommended that each church raise at least one dollar per white member and ten cents per black member for "various benevolent objects."²²

Temperance work stood at the forefront of Baptists' organizational efforts.

Suffolk Church, for instance, resolved in 1831 that those cited for drunkenness could

²⁰ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association, Held at London Bridge Meeting-House, Princess Anne County, Virginia, May 21st, 22^d and 23^d, 1830* (Norfolk: Shields and Ashburn, 1830), 6, VBHS.

²¹ *Minutes of the ...Dover Baptist Association...1849*, 15.

²² *Minutes of the ...Dover Baptist Association...1853*, 12. For other examples of how associations and churches were becoming increasingly organized see *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1833*, 8 (approval of American Sunday School Union); *Second Baptist Church Minute Book, 1820-1843*, Feb. 13, 1834, VBHS (promotion of mission work); *Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1833-1846*, Sept. 26, 1835, VBHS (discussion of church's involvement with "benevolent objects of the day"); *South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1899*, Oct. 8, 1835, VBHS (ruling that benevolent institutions were "means by the blessing of God of doing much good"); *Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1818-1857*, Mar. 11, 1836, VBHS (church leaders invited members to donate money to missionary groups); *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1839*, 10 (report that "benevolent institutions are assiduously fostered" by the churches); *Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1836-1855*, Feb. 20, 1841, VBHS (pastor was requested to give an annual sermon on the "sustaining of benevolent operatives"); *Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1831-1868*, May 29, 1841, VBHS (treasurer listed "moneys collected for benevolent objects"); *Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1818-1862*, Sept. 25, 1847, VBHS (congregation appointed a treasurer to record contributions to the church and benevolent societies); *Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1869*, Jun., Sept. 1850, and treasurer's report for 1850, VBHS (church created a "systematic plan" for raising money for benevolent projects); *Taylorville Baptist Church Minute Book, 1841-1861*, May 8, 1852, VBHS (church appointed a committee to solicit funds for different benevolent goals); *Minutes of the ...Dover Baptist Association...1858*, 4-5 (association changed its constitution to include stipulation that churches must report their "statistics," including number of white, black, male, and female members; contributions to various benevolent groups; and activities of Sunday schools).

only be readmitted to the church upon a promise of “entire abstinence.”²³ In 1836, members of Portsmouth Baptist Church were nearly unanimous in their condemnation of all forms of alcohol use.²⁴ When reminding its members of the “duty” of every Christian to support Bible, missionary, and tract societies, Dover highlighted the cause of temperance, which “above all others, better prepares the mind and heart for the understanding and reception of the glorious truths contained in the preached gospel of Christ Jesus.”²⁵ Both associations urged their members to set up anti-alcohol groups within their churches, and by the early 1850s, Portsmouth happily noted that there was not a county or town within its borders that was not home to some kind of temperance society.²⁶

Yet despite mainstream evangelicals’ heightened organization, extreme antiformalists, most notably antebellum reformer Alexander Campbell, held firmly to a “primitive” Christianity. Pointing to the simplicity of the New Testament church and upholding the authority of the local congregation, Campbell and his followers rejected institutional organization and centralization, including seminaries, ministerial ordination, missionary societies, and all forms of interdenominational benevolence.²⁷ The tension between mission-minded Baptists and anti-mission Campbellite “Reformers” held the attention of many churches in Virginia more than any other issue during the early 1830s. In 1832, the Dover Baptist Association firmly denounced the Campbellite movement,

²³ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1854, Dec. 4, 1831, VBHS.

²⁴ Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1853, May 21, 1836, VBHS.

²⁵ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1843*, 16; see also *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1846*, 8.

²⁶ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Bap. Association...1853*, 9.

²⁷ For more about Alexander Campbell and likeminded reformers, see Alley, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, 207; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 124-35; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 70-76, 101, 167-69; Noll, *America’s God*, 242-44; Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 43-44.

noting that, while this group styled themselves “Reformers,” it was “lamentably evident” that “no sect in Christendom need[ed] reformation more than they.” Dover instructed its churches to exclude all those holding to Campbell’s teachings, and First Baptist Church in Richmond severed fellowship with seventy-two Reformers that year, alleging that these people had “destroyed” the “peace and harmony” of the body.²⁸ Within the next year, Dover excluded four entire congregations for espousing Campbellism.²⁹ Clearly, mainline Baptists were committed to institution-building and organization and were determined to part company with these “primitive” critics.

While the ideology of extreme antiformalists proved challenging to the mainstream denominations, antebellum evangelicalism saw no greater division than that between North and South. Northern and southern religious mindsets became increasingly different in the nineteenth century, eventually alienating the southerners from many Christians in the North. Southern evangelicals’ continued commitment to slavery, along with the growing antipathy of many northerners toward the institution, stirred controversy within denominations, leading to the demise of national evangelical cooperation in the 1840s and, in the longer term, contributing to the break-up of the American political union.³⁰

²⁸ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1832*, 6-8, 15, VBHS; First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1831-1840, Feb. 18, 1832, VBHS. See also *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1833*, 6-10, VBHS.

²⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1833*, 6, VBHS; see also Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, 1814-1870, Jun. 27, 1835, VBHS, for the reorganization of the Lower College Baptist Church after its exclusion from the Dover Association.

³⁰ Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 2-15; C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches: Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985). Mark Noll identifies the division between slave and free states as one of the four “polarities” among antebellum evangelicals—the three others being the formalist/antiformalist division, racial differences, and gender differences. Noll, *America’s God*, 175-79.

Other religious and social differences existed between the two regions as well. In general, southern churchgoers' focus on personal redemption led them to embrace movements such as spiritual education, foreign and domestic missions, and temperance more often than the sweeping reform of social institutions so popular in the northern states. According to John Boles, since the "foremost goal of southern evangelicals was converting the individual sinner," southern Christianity lacked a "social dimension," leaving a "pitifully weak heritage of social concern and reform."³¹ Donald Mathews has further argued that southern evangelical women pursued a particular aspect of "benevolence": converting and improving the lives of their slaves. Occupying the private domestic sphere, Mathews writes, southern women were "powerless in most public acts," but could be "humored in their attempts to change the quality if not the face of slave society."³² Yet Suzanne Lebsock has provided a cogent challenge to this generalization in her study of women in antebellum Petersburg, pointing to a variety of benevolent organizations, including societies aimed not only at evangelization but also at social welfare, that were established and sustained by southern women. Anne Loveland's work

³¹ John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996 [orig. pub. as *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind*, University Press of Kentucky, 1972]), ix, xv, 195. For an important study of northern reformism, see Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 105-44. See also Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 136-84.

³² Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 115-20, quotation on 118. For other studies of the private roles of antebellum white southern women, see Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 3-38; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) and Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 171-238.

also has offered a variety of examples of the concern of southern evangelicals for social relief and of the activities they undertook to promote that cause.³³

Indeed, despite the issue of slavery that increasingly divided northern and southern Christians and eventually broke apart denominations and benevolent institutions, these groups still shared a millennial outlook throughout the antebellum period. As Catherine O’Brion contends, historians’ focus on what made the South and southern evangelicalism distinctive has obscured the commonalities that existed between the two regions in the realm of religion. Evangelical congregations, she says, “functioned as a crucible, within the antebellum South, for an emerging national culture that bound northerners and southerners together.”³⁴ While Beth Barton Schweiger contrasts northern and southern forms of benevolence by emphasizing that southern projects generally centered on educational reform and that slavery “monopolized the attention” of southern reformers, she still traces a simultaneous rise in charitable giving in northern and southern churches during the 1850s.³⁵ In an impressive local study of evangelical benevolent movements in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, John Quist identifies “parallel

³³ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 195-236, 244; Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 162-72. For more on the public reform efforts of southern women, see Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 10-70.

³⁴ Catherine Greer O’Brion, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God: Building a Community of Faith in the Virginia Tidewater, 1772-1845” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1997), 4, 75-77, 128-30, 172-74, quotation on 128.

³⁵ Beth Barton Schweiger, “The Restructuring of Southern Religion: Slavery, Denominations, and the Clerical Profession in Virginia,” in John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 302-04, quotation on 303. As further examples of the differences between northern and southern benevolence, Schweiger also argues that southerners “largely ignored the millennialism that drove much northern interest” and that southern projects “remained firmly rooted in a denominational context.” Schweiger, “Restructuring of Southern Religion,” 303-04. Loveland and Snay, on the other hand, identify postmillennial thinking among southern clergy. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 159-60; Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 99. See also Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 322. For a more in-depth study of southern benevolence and denominational growth, see Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, especially 87.

operational patterns” in the North and South, particularly within Bible and tract societies and Sunday schools. His article identifies an ideology of benevolent reform, shared by northern and southern evangelicals, that “would eliminate vice, spread the gospel, and provide Americans with a moral gyroscope that would ensure social stability.”³⁶

Thus, while slavery certainly made southern evangelicalism distinctive, attempts of southern churches and religious leaders to reform the religious instruction of blacks should be studied within the context of national reformism, which clearly captivated the South as well as the North. As Charles Irons proposes, southern campaigns to evangelize blacks were “not so much the inverse of Northern reform” as they were its “Southern analog, a program for social improvement on terms favorable to slavery” that partook of and contributed to a larger, modern reformist culture.³⁷ It was with the desire to promote spiritual conversion, Christian morality, and social order that many white Virginia Baptists endeavored to oversee black religious activity.

By the early nineteenth century, most southern white Christians supported a social hierarchy centered upon slavery. In their own brand of reformism, they saw the evangelization of black people’s souls and the improvement of the master-slave

³⁶ John W. Quist, “Slaveholding Operatives of the Benevolent Empire: Bible, Tract, and Sunday School Societies in Antebellum Tuscaloosa County, Alabama,” *Journal of Southern History* 62 (Aug. 1996), 481-526, quotations on 523-24. For the larger work, in which Quist meticulously compares benevolent activity in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, to that in Washtenaw County, Michigan, finding a “largely similar climate of reform” despite the distinguishing factor of slavery, see *Restless Visionaries: The Social Roots of Antebellum Reform in Alabama and Michigan* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), quotation on 7.

³⁷ Charles F. Irons, “Zion in Black and White: African-American Evangelicals and Missionary Work in the Old South,” in L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers, eds., *The Old South’s Modern Worlds: Slavery Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 209-27, quotation on 216.

relationship as the South's particular route toward millennial perfection.³⁸ In developing what Mathews has termed the "slaveholding ethic," many southern whites saw it as their moral duty to provide for their black servants, physically and, more important, spiritually. If millennial reformism supplied the spiritual motivation, social climate, and organizational models for southerners to focus their attention on the Christian instruction of blacks, religious paternalism provided an ideological framework and lexicon for them to do so.³⁹

The language of reformist paternalism was spoken fluently by Baptists in southeastern Virginia. Though not as frequent or pronounced as in the later antebellum period, calls to provide blacks with religious instruction appear in their records by the late eighteenth century. In 1796, the Dover Association published a circular letter on the duties of "heads of families," describing the spiritual needs of the "inferior part of the families": children and slaves. When opening his discussion of slaves, the author—prominent local Baptist historian Robert Semple—admitted that depriving people of the rights of liberty and property produced the "greatest misery" in the human race. Yet instead of advocating emancipation, he exhorted masters to instruct their slaves in Christian doctrine and to show them "humanity and tenderness." Slaves should be cautioned against vices and pointed toward "holiness of heart and life." In obeying these

³⁸ Maddex, "Proslavery Millennialism," 46-62; Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 220-33; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, "The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders' World View," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Summer 1987), 211-33; Robert M. Calhoun, *Evangelicals and Conservatives in the Early South, 1740-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 188-90; Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 98-99; William W. Freehling, "Defective Paternalism: James Henry Thornwell's Mysterious Antislavery Movement," in *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War*, ed. William W. Freehling, 59-81 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³⁹ Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 136-84; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 3-7; Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 61-63; Jeffrey Robert Young, *Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 123-92.

injunctions, masters would ensure the welfare of their “families and fellow creatures” and honor the Lord.⁴⁰

As fathers and masters, white Baptist men were expected to lead their households in “family worship,” or daily prayers and devotions. In the minutes of its meeting in 1812, the Portsmouth Association implored members not to neglect these duties: “Do you not think you will have to give an account to God for your conduct? How can you look at your children and servants, and know that they have souls to be saved or forever lost, and be unconcerned about them?”⁴¹ Baptists held these duties in high regard throughout the antebellum years—though admonitions such as this one suggest an unsurprising gap between ideals and everyday practice. The Dover Association expressed similar sentiments in a circular letter in 1843 which described “family worship” as an “invaluable *privilege*” that benefited fathers and masters as well as children and slaves. In “collect[ing]” his wife, children, and slaves around him for religious instruction, a head of household would find his “faith increased” and “devotions quickened.”⁴²

The idea of mutual obligations and mutual benefits lay at the heart of paternalism.⁴³ In 1800, Portsmouth highlighted this reciprocity in a circular letter on “Family Religion”: “As masters we are continually receiving the fruits of our servants [sic] labors; and must it not be base ingratitude to be incessantly receiving *all their temporals*, and yet at the same time feel no disposition to communicate unto them our spirituals.” The author continued by enjoining readers that if they wanted to have “good”

⁴⁰ *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association...1796*, 9-12.

⁴¹ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...[1812]*, 6. In 1813, the Dover Association even discussed how to discipline ministers who failed to lead their families in regular worship at home. *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1813*, 11.

⁴² *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1843*, 11; italics in the original.

⁴³ *Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 3-7.

children and servants, if they aimed for the community's welfare, if they wanted to be "good Republicans, good Patriots," and above all, if they desired the "glory of God," then they should make their homes "Temples of the Lord of Hosts."⁴⁴

Sentiments like these were still emanating from Baptist circles fifty years later, when someone posed the question in the Portsmouth Association minutes: "Have our servants no claim on us?" The author of this piece continued, "Are we under no obligations to those who perform amongst us all the drudgery of life—by whose attentions we are often freed from cold, from hunger, from thirst?"⁴⁵ Around the same time, the Dover meeting also published a report on the subject, noting that Christian slaveholders must not regard their slaves simply as part of their "goods and chattels," but instead as "accountable and immortal beings," who would benefit from daily worship sessions within a master's pious "domestic circle."⁴⁶ These statements of concern for the eternal welfare of black men and women went well beyond a pragmatic desire to elicit obedience by inculcating godliness in slaves.⁴⁷

Leaders of the individual churches within the Dover and Portsmouth Associations likewise expounded these views to their congregations. At Bruington Baptist in King and Queen County, a committee for the religious instruction of black members stated in 1859

⁴⁴ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1800*, 8, 12; italics in the original.

⁴⁵ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1850*, 13-15; see also *Minutes of the...Portsmouth Baptist Association...1858*, 11-12.

⁴⁶ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1849*, 14-15.

⁴⁷ To abolitionists such as escaped slave Henry "Box" Brown of Richmond, however, slaveholding Christianity was a "delusion" designed "to keep the slaves in a docile and submissive frame of mind" by threatening hellfire to the disobedient. None had more cause to lambast the hypocrisy of southern evangelicalism than Brown, who lost his wife and children when they were sold to North Carolina by a "pious" master in 1848. Charles Stearns, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown...* (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849), 47-56, quotation on 47, available online at Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter DocSouth), added 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html> (accessed Sept. 14, 2012), and Suzette Spencer, "Henry Box Brown (1815 or 1816–after February 26, 1889)," *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Jan. 12, 2012), in *Encyclopedia Virginia*: http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Brown_Henry_Box_ca_1815 (accessed Sept. 14, 2012).

the deepest motive for such work: “to force on us a sense of duty [God] has made the two races dependent the one upon the other, so that while they daily minister to us in carnal things we may not be recreant to the sacred trust of providing for them wholesome spiritual food.” The committee advised all slaveholding members to assemble their slaves every Sunday morning or evening for “religious instruction adopted to their capacities,” asserting that doing so would bring an “incalculable amount of good to both teacher & taught.” As was done in many other congregations, the committee also resolved to appoint four men to conduct religious services at the church every Sunday evening for slaves in the community.⁴⁸

Just as the paternalistic mindset pervaded southern slaveholding, these urgent calls for the Christian instruction of blacks were ubiquitous in the Tidewater for decades. Certain events and movements seemed to provoke a heightened awareness of the need, however. Following Nat Turner’s uprising in 1831, when many white Virginians felt threatened by Turner’s religious motivations and Baptist connections, Baptists made certain to insist that proper religious instruction would actually prevent such calamities. With an eye to public safety, and an even stronger interest in the public image of their cause—not to mention a sincere desire to carry on their efforts to evangelize—white Baptists responded to the Turner crisis by continuing their calls for regular, supervised instruction of blacks.

In 1835, the Baptist General Association of Virginia, consisting of delegates from churches all over the state, published a committee report on the “instruction of colored people,” probably in response to the onslaught of abolitionist attacks directed at the

⁴⁸ Bruington Baptist Church, *Minute Book*, 1831-1868, Aug. 6, 1859.

southern states during the early 1830s.⁴⁹ The report admitted that “very delicate relations” existed between blacks and whites and reminded readers of the need for “great caution” in undertaking any plan to “benefit” the black population. Yet the writers of the report did not seem concerned about the danger of insurrection per se; rather, they expressed the need for caution in avoiding any “infringement” upon the laws of the state, and, implicitly, any association with abolitionism. They then printed an excerpt of the legislation of 1832, including the section which noted that nothing should prevent ministers from giving religious guidance to slaves and free blacks during the daytime or masters from gathering their slaves for private devotions at any time. The committee members professed their “high gratification” that the law admitted that religious instruction would not impair the master-slave relationship. More than that, however, they cited “experiments” done by the Baptists and other denominations which supposedly demonstrated that religious instruction actually improved the black population “in many qualifications,” with “no injury” done to anyone. Truly, they concluded, religious teaching elevated the “moral character and habits of *all* who receive it.”⁵⁰

Historians traditionally maintain that southern evangelicalism underwent a dramatic shift following Turner’s uprising. According to Curtis Johnson, whites responded to the rebellion by “enacting further restrictions on slave literacy and by increasing their supervision of black religion, hoping to prevent the rise of future black

⁴⁹ For studies of southerners’ responses to abolitionism during the antebellum period, see Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 196; Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom*, 57-74.

⁵⁰ *Proceedings of the Eleventh [Twelfth] Annual Meeting of the General Association of Virginia; Held with the First Baptist Church, Richmond, April 1835*, 3-5, VBHS. Upon reflecting on these “experiments” in 1863, the General Association commended Rev. Ryland and the First African Church in Richmond for demonstrating “what Christian masters are so fond to believe—namely, that both master and servant may, without, in any way, interfering with their social relations, profit in their souls by laboring, each for the other’s well being, in the things pertaining to the Kingdom of Jesus.” *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, For the Sessions of 1861, 1862, and 1863* (Richmond: Macfarlane & Ferguson, 1863), 76-77, VBHS.

messianic leaders.”⁵¹ Charles Irons asserts that after Turner, “whites paid closer attention to black Virginians than ever and remained interested in making evangelicalism attractive to African Americans.” But, he continues, “the new objective was not fellowship; it was security.”⁵² These accounts consider southern politicians, pundits, and evangelicals as forming a single category—“whites”—even though the composition and the interests of these groups sometimes diverged.

For John Floyd, Virginia’s governor during the Turner crisis, black preachers and unrestricted religious assemblies had clearly precipitated a “spirit of revolt,” as he told the House of Delegates in an address after the rebellion. Along with others in the state government, he insisted that black preachers must be “silenced” and black religious activity monitored closely.⁵³ While many ordinary people shared the governor’s

⁵¹ Johnson, *Redeeming America*, 183.

⁵² Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 153. See also Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974); 285-86, 291; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 185-90; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 137-38, 177, 204; Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin’ Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 33; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 325; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 212; Randolph Ferguson Scully, *Religion and the Making of Nat Turner’s Virginia: Baptist Community and Conflict, 1740-1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 197-98, 221-32.

⁵³ Message of Governor Floyd to the Virginia Legislature, Dec. 6, 1831, in Henry Irving Tragle, compiler, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 432-33. In late December 1831, only four months after Turner’s revolt, a much larger rebellion of some 60,000 slaves, known as the “Baptist War,” broke out in Jamaica. Led by a literate Baptist slave named Sam Sharpe, the revolt had roots in the autonomous gatherings of black Baptists that had emerged around Jamaica’s mission churches. Historian Mary Reckord has shown that the Christian message of spiritual equality, rumors of emancipation, and the presence of white missionaries “whom the slaves could identify as their allies” fostered the uprising, which indirectly led to the abolition of slavery in the West Indies. Mary Reckord, “The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831,” *Past and Present* 40 (Jul. 1968), 108-25, esp. 108, 115, and 123, quotation on 108. Although this rebellion occurred after John Floyd addressed Virginia’s House of Delegates in early December, news of it no doubt influenced white legislators already prepared to restrict black religious activity that coming March. The fact that many white Virginia Baptists continued to tolerate and sometimes even support black religious autonomy after revolts in Southampton County and Jamaica, both of which were associated with black Baptist activity, is significant.

assessments, it is too much to say, as Irons has done, that Floyd was “voicing the consensus of white Virginians.”⁵⁴

The assertion that white evangelicals increased their supervision of blacks because of Nat Turner is simplistic on at least two counts. As shown above, some Baptist churches had attempted to manage black religious activity long before Turner. And on the other hand, reform and increased monitoring of the religious instruction of blacks significantly accelerated only in the 1840s, and not directly following the events in Southampton County. Even the General Association’s report on the “instruction of the colored people” was not produced until 1835, and no mention of the rebellion or subsequent laws appeared in the Association’s minutes before that.

White Baptists certainly shared their neighbors’ concerns about public security, but their priority in relating to black evangelicals for decades, both before and after 1831, was conversion and spiritual discipline. Their responses to state legislation at various points during the nineteenth century evince these central goals. In 1804, for instance, delegates at the Dover Association resolved to petition the state legislature to repeal the law “declaring what shall be deemed an unlawful assembly of slaves.”⁵⁵ Following the slave conspiracies of 1800 and 1802, the Virginia legislature had passed a statute outlawing all gatherings of slaves after dark and authorizing local officials to disperse such meetings and issue corporal punishments.⁵⁶ The Dover minutes do not report what became of this petition for repeal; perhaps the association never actually submitted it, as

⁵⁴ Irons, “The Chief Cornerstone,” 154.

⁵⁵ *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association...1804*, 7-8.

⁵⁶ Samuel Shepherd, ed., *The Statutes at Large of Virginia, from October Session 1792 to December Session 1806, Inclusive... Vol. III* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1836), 108.

it does not appear in the state legislative archives.⁵⁷ In 1808, however, delegates Robert Semple and James Greenwood composed a circular letter on the duty of Christians to submit to the civil government. Toward the end of this document, the writers avowed that, while the laws of Virginia were “probably the most unexceptionable of any in the world,” the ones regarding slave assemblies were “not so well as [they] could wish.” Yet since those laws were “no where put in force, as to the improper parts,” Baptists should “feel no inconvenience.”⁵⁸

In the years after Turner’s revolt, some white Baptists again proved ambivalent toward, or even openly opposed to, state laws restricting the religious activities of slaves and free blacks.⁵⁹ The Baptist General Association voted to petition the state legislature in June of 1848 to modify the laws so as to permit slaves to assemble “at any time by the permission of their owners, in the presence of a white person.”⁶⁰ While the law of 1832 had allowed blacks to attend white-led night meetings with the written permission of their masters, the new law, passed a few months before the General Association met in 1848, prohibited slaves and free blacks from assembling at night “under whatsoever pretext.” Although state legislators exhibited a continual concern that unrestricted night gatherings could lead to conspiracies, these Baptists hoped to enable blacks to participate in “all

⁵⁷ Library of Virginia, Legislative Petitions Database, <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/petitions>.

⁵⁸ *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association...1808*, 8.

⁵⁹ For an example of white Virginia Methodists who sympathized with black evangelicals after Nat Turner’s Rebellion, see a highly significant but under-appreciated document study of how seven white Methodists from the Norfolk area defended the rights of enslaved preachers in a series of appeals to the Methodist Church—Reginald F. Hildebrand, “‘An Imperious Sense of Duty’: Documents Illustrating an Episode in the Methodist Reaction to the Nat Turner Revolt,” *Methodist History* 19 (Apr. 1981), 155-74. These men questioned how the Methodist Episcopal Church, “exalted in the Estimation of Every Philanthropist for her untiring exertions in ameliorating the condition of the poor unfortunate Slave” could “be the first to unite with heartless Politicians and interested Slave holders, in depriving them of their few Religious rights & priviledges [sic]?” “A Memorial to the Virginia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” [c. Feb. 23, 1832], in Hildebrand, “Imperious Sense of Duty,” 157.

⁶⁰ *Minutes of the Virginia Baptist Anniversaries...1848*, 7.

proper religious exercises,” as long as they were supervised by whites.⁶¹ According to a committee report at the Rappahannock Association’s meeting in 1850, however, it was ultimately deemed “inexpedient” to petition the legislature on the subject. Since the “public mind” was “very much excited on the questions of abolitionism, freesoilism and kindred subjects” at that time, the committee admitted that “little hope could be entertained” that such a petition succeed. Additionally, the provisions regarding black assemblies in the recently released Code of 1849 were “not considered to be as stringent” as those passed in 1848.⁶²

The members of the Dover Baptist Association made attempts to sort out the new racial code as well; in 1850, Baptist delegate Archibald Thomas presented a report to that body concerning the recent revisions. Thomas had consulted Richmond attorney A. Judson Crane in order to ensure that he and the rest of the association understood the legislation. Crane carefully reviewed what was forbidden by the law: all assemblies of blacks “in the night time *for any purpose*”; all assemblies of blacks “for the purpose of instruction in reading or writing”; and all assemblies for worship when “conducted by a negro.” Crane “suppose[d]” that a slaveowner “might with safety” gather slaves “around his or her own fireside” for religious worship at any time of day. This type of private

⁶¹ Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:1 and 2, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Two* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 20-21; Criminal Code, 1848, Chap. 120: Chap. X:39-40, *Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia Passed at the Session Commencing December 6, 1847, and ending April 5, 1848...* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1848), 120; *Minutes of the Virginia Baptist Anniversaries...1848*, 7.

⁶² *Minutes of the Seventh Annual Session of the Rappahannock Baptist Association, Held at Menokin Church, Richmond County, on Saturday Lord’s Day and Monday, August 4th, 5th and 6th [1849]* (Richmond: G.K. Ellyson, 1849), 13; *Minutes of the...Rappahannock Baptist Association...1850*, 17. The Dover Baptist Association split in 1843, forming the Rappahannock Baptist Association which took charge of the counties between the Rappahannock and York Rivers. *Proceedings of the... Baptist General Association of Virginia...1844*, 40. It is unclear what restrictions this Baptist committee believed had been altered between 1848 and 1849, as the code still prohibited all night meetings of slaves and free blacks, *The Code of Virginia...1849*, Chap. CXCVIII:31-32 (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, 1849), 747-48.

devotion, along with public worship conducted by a white person in the daytime, seemed to Crane “the only means of religious culture left free” to black Baptists.⁶³

Following Crane’s analysis, R. Gwathmey of Taylorsville Baptist in Hanover County offered a significant reflection and exhortation to the Dover Association. Frustrated that the curtailment of black religious activity under Virginia law seemed “almost insuperable,” he reminded listeners of the “solemn words of the apostle, that if any provide not for his own, and especially those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.” He then recommended that Baptists “use all proper means” to reform the laws and “remove all restraint from the prudent exertion to teach the African race to read the Bible, and instruct them in those things which belong to their everlasting weal.” In the meantime, Gwathmey urged masters to provide their slaves with oral instruction “around the family altar,” and appealed to all Baptist leaders to set up meetings in their churches for the “especial instruction of the colored race.” Once again, the notion of reciprocity that characterized religious paternalism was invoked, as Gwathmey concluded that “our own souls would be watered, whilst we were laboring to water others.”⁶⁴ Although the association could not, in the interest of congregational sovereignty, adopt any formal ruling regarding Gwathmey’s recommendation that churches hold special meetings for black members, some churches did take Gwathmey’s exhortation to heart by implementing such practices, as will be discussed below.

Gwathmey’s words fittingly summarize the position of more than a few white Baptist Virginians concerning black Christians and the state legislation restricting their

⁶³ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1850*, 9-11, italics in the original. See U.S. Federal Census of 1850, Richmond, for lawyer Admiram J. Crane.

⁶⁴ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1850*, 11. For scriptural reference, see 1 Tim. 5:8. For R. Gwathmey’s church affiliation, see *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1849*, table of churches, 5, where Gwathmey is listed as a delegate from Taylorsville.

actions. The laws often hindered white evangelicals' attempts to Christianize free blacks and slaves and thus produced a crucial tension between white Baptists and lawmakers during the antebellum years. Although required by scripture to submit to civil authority, Baptists were not in full agreement with the state's perception of and restrictions on black religious activity. Gwathmey was not alone in believing that the paternal duty of southern whites required them to improve and expand the religious instruction of blacks. The leaders of Fairfields Baptist Church of Northumberland County informed the Rappahannock Association in 1847, for instance, that its religious instruction for black congregants had had "the most beneficial effect"; black men and women were "gladly" receiving "the things that make for their Eternal Welfare." The letter's author added that "judging by the great reduction of vice and crime," such teaching had a "Salutary influence" on the morals of those instructed and "their fellow servants around them."⁶⁵

The Rappahannock Association, which had appointed a committee to protest the racial restrictions of 1848, continually advocated the religious instruction of blacks during this period. Insisting on the social benefits of such instruction—"the religion of the Bible must make better servants and better citizens"—Rappahannock nevertheless focused primarily on the "improvement in the piety and intelligence" of black members, fervently noting in 1851 that "the colored people must be saved or lost."⁶⁶

When Richmond's First African Church faced substantial opposition in the early 1850s following the conviction of members Jane and John Williams for murdering their master's family, the leadership of the city's white Baptist churches published a lengthy

⁶⁵ Fairfields Baptist Church Minute Book, letter to the Rappahannock Association, 1847.

⁶⁶ *Minutes of the...Rappahannock Baptist Association...1849*, 13; *Minutes of the...Rappahannock Baptist Association...1850*, 17; *Minutes of the...Rappahannock Baptist Association...1851*, 15-16; *Minutes of the...Rappahannock Baptist Association*, 13-14.

defense of the doctrine and practices of Rev. Ryland and the black church, reminding readers that “respected white” members of other churches and “not slaves merely,” had also committed “gross crimes” at various points. Affirming their commitment to the religious instruction of blacks, these elders and deacons contended that the ministry at First African was “best adapted to prevent the perpetration of crimes and promote [blacks’] spiritual interests.”⁶⁷ White Baptists clearly promulgated the view that public safety and social control would be furthered, not threatened, by such instruction—yet it was the saving of souls, blacks’ and whites’ “Eternal Welfare” and “spiritual interests,” rather than simply the suppression of alleged subversive tendencies, that seemed to motivate the evangelically minded the most.⁶⁸

Alongside this understated but persistent tension between civil lawmakers and white Virginia Baptists, the latter openly criticized northern abolitionists and pointed to efforts at Christianizing slaves to rebut attacks from these critics. At their meeting in 1835, members of the Dover Association unanimously expressed their “deep regret and decided disapprobation” for the work of abolitionists, which they thought was “calculated...to excite discontent and insubordination among the slaves, to destroy the peace of the community, and even to injure the interests of those for whose welfare those misguided men profess to be labouring.”⁶⁹ White southern evangelicals believed they knew how to shepherd slaves best, while northern interference hindered blacks’ spiritual growth. In the minds of white Baptists, advocacy of improved religious education of

⁶⁷ *Religious Herald*, Nov. 11, 1852. See also “Religious Instruction for Colored People,” resolutions dated Oct. 17, 1852, in Robert Ryland, “Reminiscences of the First African Church, No. 3,” *American Baptist Memorial* 15 (Nov. 1855), 325-27.

⁶⁸ Many southern evangelicals, contends Anne Loveland, “believed that the most important thing they could do for the Negroes was ‘to rescue them from spiritual bondage.’” Loveland, *Southern Evangelicalism*, 256.

⁶⁹ *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1835*, 7.

enslaved people was the correct Christian position regarding slavery, providing a guide to ameliorate the institution as well as a justification for its continuation.⁷⁰

Yet southern white Christians had not always supported or even accepted slavery. In the late eighteenth century, antislavery sentiments were common among Baptists and Methodists. This heritage, along with evangelicals' ties to national benevolent societies, caused some slaveholders to view Baptists and Methodists with suspicion throughout the antebellum period, as did the tendency of whites to link religion with rebelliousness, particularly after the violence in Southampton County. As Mitchell Snay has shown, "the assumed complicity of religion with abolitionism forced southern clergymen to disavow any connection with the movement."⁷¹

In the 1790s, both the Dover and Portsmouth Associations had denounced slavery as a "root of bitterness" that was "*contrary to the laws of God and nature.*"⁷² Dover even recommended that its members petition the General Assembly to enact a plan for the gradual emancipation of Virginia's slaves.⁷³ Black Creek Church in Southampton County had an especially intriguing history concerning its members' views of slavery. The church leaders condemned slaveholding as "unrighteous" in 1786. Over the next decade, several white members expressed "difficulty" maintaining fellowship with slaveowners. One of these protestors was Sarah Barrow, wife of renowned preacher David Barrow. Along with a group of other families in the church, the Barrows had freed

⁷⁰ Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom*, 57-72, 111-30; Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 193-99; Young, *Domesticating Slavery*, 177-78.

⁷¹ Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 37. See also James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Quest for Social Power* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004 [orig. pub. 1986]), 16-20.

⁷² *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...*[1796], 5, italics in the original.

⁷³ *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association...*[1797], 5.

their slaves some years earlier and had become active proponents of antislavery views within the congregation.

Although Sarah Barrow returned to the Lord's Table to take communion with slaveholders, she and David eventually decided to leave the church and moved to Kentucky in 1798. David Barrow published a circular letter upon their departure, explaining his family's need to sell their land to settle their debts, which they could not do in the "poor country" of Virginia without engaging in speculating or slaveholding, due to the exhaustion of Virginia's soil.⁷⁴ He then delineated his doctrinal and political creeds and urged slaveowners to "consider how inconsistently they act, with a Republican Government, and whether in this particular, they are *doing, as they would others should do to them!*"⁷⁵ Like Sarah Barrow, Black Creek member Noel Vick refused at different times during the early 1790s to participate in communion with slaveholding "brethren." The church leaders managed to bring him back into fellowship with the rest of the congregation, although he was finally excluded for alleged ungodly behavior and poor attendance.⁷⁶

Black Creek did not face another significant conflict over slavery until the 1820s, but by then it was clear that the congregation had moved almost entirely into the proslavery camp. After struggling with his conscience, preacher Jonathan Lankford

⁷⁴ Carlos R. Allen, Jr., ed., "David Barrow's Circular Letter of 1798," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 20 (Jul. 1963), 441 and 445; Avery Odelle Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006 [orig. pub. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1925]), 72-121, esp. 85; Ernest A. Freeberg, "Why David Barrow Moved to Kentucky," *Virginia Baptist Register* 32 (1993), 1618; Vivien Sandlund, "'A Devilish and Unnatural Usurpation': Baptist Evangelical Ministers and Antislavery in the Early Nineteenth Century, A Study of the Ideas and Activism of David Barrow" *American Baptist Quarterly* 12 (1994), 262-77.

⁷⁵ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1774-1835, Nov. 24, 1786, Jun. 24, Aug. 26, 1791, VBHS; Allen, ed., "David Barrow's Circular Letter of 1798," 450, italics in the original. See also Patrick H. Breen, "Contested Communion: The Limits of White Solidarity in Nat Turner's Virginia," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007), 685-89.

⁷⁶ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 22, 1793, Feb. 21, 1794, Nov. 25, 1796, Aug. 23, 1799, Feb. 26, Mar. 26, 1802.

finally declared to the church in 1825 that he could no longer “administer the ordinances of the gospel of this Church” because of his opposition to slavery and his differences with slaveholding members.⁷⁷ The church clerk recorded the congregation’s “surprise as well as difficulty” with Lankford’s pronouncement. Several months later, the church voted to expel him for refusing to commune with slaveowners, for yielding “too much to the delusion of Satan,” and for attempting to “split the Church asunder in order to promote in some way or other his own selfish views and purposes.”⁷⁸

Lankford applied for restoration in 1841, appealing to the congregation by confessing his “error as regards slavery.” Yet when questioned whether he could fully commune with all the members, he admitted that he was not prepared to decide that. He promised to “make the matter a subject of prayer” and asked the church to do so as well.⁷⁹ The minutes do not report what happened to Lankford, but the half-hearted reversal of his views in an attempt to compromise with the church reveals how complex the relationship between slavery and evangelicalism could be even as late as the 1840s.

While a small number of white southern churchgoers still held antislavery beliefs in the antebellum period, the majority had accepted slavery, and many were pursuing paternalistic reforms to the institution and promoting the religious instruction of blacks. Those not in agreement were marginalized in church fellowships generally, and particularly so in projects to provide systematic religious training to enslaved and free black brethren. Like Black Creek, Tucker Swamp Church in Southampton County confronted a believer for his antislavery views. In 1844, William Cofer was brought

⁷⁷ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1825. See also Breen, “Contested Communion,” 689-92.

⁷⁸ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar., Jun., Sept., Dec. 1826, Sept. 1827, quotations from Sept. 1827 meeting.

⁷⁹ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun., [Jul.], 1841.

before the congregation for “absenting himself” from church meetings and communion ceremonies. When asked his reasons, Cofer stated that he “had thought slavery was wrong.” The church refused to accept his stance, and Cofer then “acknowledged he was wrong” and “changed his mind on the subject.” Upon hearing his recantation, the congregation offered to “forbear and forgive” him. In the very next entry in its minute book, the church voted to set up meetings on the fourth Sunday of the month for the “benefit of the coloured members.”⁸⁰ So it was that Tucker Swamp implicitly connected its unequivocal support of slavery with a commitment to religious instruction for black members.

In Isle of Wight County, Mill Swamp church charged John Morriss with holding abolitionist sentiments in 1853, after which he confessed that his views had been “formed by a weak judgement [sic] on the Scriptures” and apologized to the congregation. He promised to say no more on the subject until his opinions were “more settled.”⁸¹ Cofer’s and Morriss’s retractions indicate the hegemony of proslavery sentiments within the Baptist congregations of southeastern Virginia. Combined with Baptists’ desires to reform their approach to black members, these cases indicate the development of a cohesive, yet still complex, ideology connecting slavery, race, and instructional reform.⁸²

⁸⁰ Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1818-1857, Sept. 6, 1844.

⁸¹ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1840-1886, Mar. 27, 1853, VBHS.

⁸² See John Patrick Daly’s study of the development of proslavery evangelical ideology—the “sacralization” of slaveholding—and southern white ministers’ calls to reform the institution, primarily the treatment of slaves, in light of such ideology. Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom*, 29, 33-42, 63-72, 109-10, 127-30. For other studies of the development of proslavery ideology, see H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...: Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 129-165; Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 190-218; Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 1-20; Tise, *Proslavery*; Edward R. Crowther, *Southern Evangelicals and the Coming of the Civil War*, Studies in American Religion, Vol. 73 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001); Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, 407-635.

When the American Baptist Home Mission Board, a national benevolent society, refused to appoint a slaveholder to the mission field and openly declared its opposition to the institution at its meeting in Boston early in 1845, Baptists across the South withdrew their support from the organization and established the Southern Baptist Convention.⁸³ Sharp lines had been drawn within the denomination nationally, and white Virginia Baptists went with the rest of the South. The General Association of Virginia expressed its regret that “great scriptural principles had been trampled under foot” in the Home Mission Board’s “unconstitutional” action, but also declared that the Southern Convention was “supremely anxious to prepare united and efficient action in the work of the Lord.”⁸⁴ On the local level, churches such as Bruington and Suffolk agreed to send their own delegates to attend the Southern Convention, thereby approving the separation from the northern Board.⁸⁵

While southern Baptists had been issuing calls for Christian instruction to blacks for quite some time, the denominational schism, perhaps ironically, provided added impetus for their cause. At the same session in which the above remarks concerning the Home Mission Board were adopted, the General Association also submitted a “plan” for the “religious improvement of the colored population,” noting that God would “require an account of all who refused to consider” the spiritual needs of black men and women.⁸⁶ The Portsmouth Association’s Committee on Foreign Missions resolved that the

⁸³ For more detailed accounts of the denominational split, see Alley, *History of Baptists in Virginia*, 214-19; Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia, 1699-1926* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist Board of Missions and Education, 1955), 273-74; Smith, *In His Image, But...*, 115-27.

⁸⁴ *Proceedings of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1845*, 26-27; see also *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association*, 1845, 7.

⁸⁵ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1831-1868, Apr. 7, 1845; Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1854, May 1, 1845. See also Fairfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1844-1906, Apr. 27, 1845, VBHS.

⁸⁶ *Proceedings of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1845*, 4-5.

separation caused by the “mortifying and injurious course of [their] Northern Brethren” should not hamper Virginia Baptists’ zeal or cause them to cease their “efforts for the conversion of the heathen.”⁸⁷ Although this particular resolution addressed foreign missionary ventures, the association viewed its ministry to slaves and free blacks at home as equally urgent if not more so. In a lengthy address on the “instruction of colored persons,” delegate R.H. Land admonished the members of the Portsmouth Association not to lose their focus on supporting mission work. “Is the soul of the wild Ethiopian who roams over his native hills and valleys, of more value than the domesticated Ethiopian who sits by our fireside?” he asked.⁸⁸ White Baptists were more certain than ever that evangelizing slaves was the unique calling of southern Christians.

National millennial fervor, religious paternalism, racial unrest, and defensive posturing against northern and southern critics all contributed powerful incentives for white Baptists to reform their methods of evangelizing and instructing African Americans. Yet in studying spiritual mindsets and motivations, one must take care not to reduce the rhetoric and actions of a particular group into a wholly utilitarian, pragmatic, or self-serving ideology. In the words of John Boles, “one should resist the temptation” to interpret southern evangelical reform “simply as an example of successful social control exerted by whites over blacks.”⁸⁹ It is essential to remember that many southern white evangelicals sincerely believed that providing religious training to slaves and free blacks was a God-honoring cause that would benefit blacks and whites alike.

⁸⁷ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1845*, 5. For the Portsmouth Association’s discussion of the conflicts with and separation from other national benevolent societies, see *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1846*, 6 (American Bible Society) and *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1858*, 5 (American Tract Society).

⁸⁸ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Bap. Association...1850*, 13-15; see also, *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1858*, 11-12.

⁸⁹ John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 157.

Evangelicals, Anne Loveland reminds us, “sought to provide the Negro with something they themselves valued greatly.”⁹⁰ However abhorrent their racial views may be in our eyes, they saw it as a righteous duty to bring black men and women into the Christian kingdom. An intricate web of complex and even contradictory motivations underlay that effort.

Like other religious reforms, Baptists’ urgent appeals for improvements in the instruction of blacks generally proceeded from the “top down”—from the association meetings to the individual churches. Although Baptists practiced congregationally-centered governance, the district and statewide associations did hold considerable influence over church practices, particularly as the denomination became more organized in the later antebellum period. The General Association issued calls for systematic religious training in 1835 and 1845, urging pastors, church members, and masters to schedule regular meetings of preaching and discipline “particularly for the colored people.” Additionally, the General Association recommended that churches bring blacks “under the influence of the temperance reformation,” thus uniting two southern evangelical reform goals.⁹¹

In response to the state legislation of 1832 restricting black religious activity, the Dover Association recommended that its churches consider “a more systematic course of oral religious instruction for the benefit of coloured persons.”⁹² Several years later, a Dover committee announced that the “morality and piety among the people of color”

⁹⁰ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 254.

⁹¹ *Proceedings of the...General Association of Virginia...1835*, 3-5; *Proceedings of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1845*, 4-5.

⁹² *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association...1834*, 7-8.

needed improvement and urged pastors to hold exclusive services every other Sunday for instruction “of the *plainest* kind.” Furthermore, this committee preceded the General Association in calling for the organization of temperance societies for black members. Dover also suggested that masters cease assigning slaves “*unnecessary* labor on the Lord’s day” and instead require them to attend “family worship.”⁹³

A little to the south, the Portsmouth Association proved even more thorough than Dover in recommending policies for its congregations. In 1839, after hearing a committee’s report on black churches, the association voted to “do all in [its] power” to bring slaves under the teaching of the scriptures, as well as to “impress upon the minds” of its ministers the importance of improving the “uneducated” black community in this way. The association’s members then resolved to bring the black churches of Norfolk and Petersburg under the control of neighboring white churches.⁹⁴ Yet despite the urgency of this message, the Petersburg congregations were still without a regular white minister two years later, when the association finally appointed a committee to locate one for them.⁹⁵

Heeding the Dover Association’s recommendation and “in accordance with the act of the [state] assembly,” First Baptist of Richmond appointed a committee of thirteen white male members in 1835 to attend all meetings for “coloured discipline” and to develop methods for the scriptural instruction of the black congregants. Church leaders were to “impress on the minds” of black members their “duty” to attend preaching

⁹³ *Minutes of the... Dover Baptist Association...1841*, 11, italics in the original; also see the “Corresponding Letter,” 16.

⁹⁴ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1839*, 13-14. For an in-depth discussion of Portsmouth’s ruling, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp. 168-71 and 180-81.

⁹⁵ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1841*, 10.

services and correctly inform them of the state laws.⁹⁶ While the leaders of First Baptist clearly saw a need to implement the state's restrictions, it is interesting that they did not appoint such a committee until three years after the post-Turner laws were enacted. Moreover, civil authorities apparently did not pressure this highly visible church located in Virginia's capital city to act sooner. Nevertheless, it was still the black deacons at First Baptist who were charged with overseeing the black members, and when the First African Church was established out of First Baptist six years later, thirty black deacons held significant authority in directing their congregation. After several months of debate, Second Baptist also agreed to set up specific preaching services for blacks on Sunday afternoons, but the church actually rescinded this resolution within a year after a number of black members stopped attending.⁹⁷

Around the same time as First and Second Baptist took these steps, whites at Bruington Baptist considered the subject of "oral instruction" for black people and appointed a committee to superintend meetings on Sunday afternoons by reading scripture, singing, and praying with black congregants.⁹⁸ The level of supervision apparently waxed and waned over the years. Church records do not mention the subject again until 1845, when a committee of twenty-four whites was commissioned to "go out in the time of preaching on Lords day & preserve proper order among the col'd people,"

⁹⁶ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 11, 1835. For early examples of a church organizing specific meetings to oversee black members, see South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, 1775-1827, Oct. 2, 1778, Nov. 30, 1817, and Mar. 2, 1821, VBHS.

⁹⁷ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1820-1843, Mar. 20, Apr. 29, May 15 and 29, Aug. 20, 1834, Feb. 12, Apr. 14, 1835.

⁹⁸ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1831-1868, Apr. 4, 1835. For other examples of formal white oversight, see Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1853, Dec. 11, 1835; Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1818-1857, Mar. 12, 1841, Mar. 8, Sept. 6 and 22, 1844, Mar. 30, 1845, Sept. 11, 1846, Dec. 12, 1856; 1858-1906, Mar. 10, 1860, Nov. 10, 1861, VBHS; Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1854, Jul. 1, 1843, Sept. 19, 1846, Mar. 18, 1854; 1855-1907, Oct. 31, 1858, VBHS; Taylorsville Baptist Church Meeting Book, 1841-1861, Jun. 10, 1848, Apr. 15, 1849; Walnut Grove Baptist Church Minute Book, 1841-1859, Oct. 20, Nov. 11, 1849, Nov. 30, 1850, Dec. 12, 1858, Mar. 19, 1859, VBHS.

indicating the church's concern—though only after the passage of a decade—that blacks were exercising too much freedom.⁹⁹ At Glebe Landing, a committee was formed to attend the black congregants at “their night Meetings” in 1846; blacks from this church had apparently been gathering independently after dark, a twofold violation of the state law.¹⁰⁰

In Nansemond County, black believers at Shoulder's Hill gathered for supervised prayer meetings two evenings a month in the 1830s.¹⁰¹ In 1843, the church finally ruled that these meetings should conclude one hour before sunset, fully eleven years after the state had restricted night gatherings of slaves.¹⁰² A year later, the church granted black people in the vicinity of the Sycamore Hill meeting house the “privilege” of gathering every Sunday afternoon. The church also authorized its black members to set up a “bush arbor” at a “convenient distance” from the Shoulder's Hill meeting house during an August revival that year so that they could assemble at the same time as the whites. The minutes do not indicate whether a white person was appointed or required to attend the meetings in the arbor, but the fact that white church leaders sponsored the separate space may indicate that “bush arbors”—which historians cite as the very emblem of the “invisible institution” of slave religion—may not always have been so secretive. In establishing a meeting place reminiscent of autonomous slave gatherings, whites at Shoulder's Hill demonstrated their awareness of such practices—simultaneously co-

⁹⁹ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1831-1868, Apr. 7, 1845. See also Aug. 6, 1859.

¹⁰⁰ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, 1825-1865, Nov. 1846, VBHS. Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:1 and 2, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Two*, 20-21.

¹⁰¹ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1783-1907, May 16, 1835, Jul. 1836, VBHS.

¹⁰² Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 1843, Jan. 1844. The Virginia law of 1832 prohibited slaves from gathering at night without written permission from their masters. Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:2, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Two*, 20-21. The law of 1848 further restricted nighttime meetings; see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, p. 160, fn 157.

opting a black device in the interests of racial supervision *and* further encouraging black independence.¹⁰³ Black congregants were later granted permission to use both the Shoulder's Hill and Sycamore Hill buildings twice a month, but they were instructed to disperse if no white member arrived for these meetings.¹⁰⁴

After member Rice Carney agreed to allow the black members of Shoulder's Hill to build a shed on his land for worship in the late 1840s, various whites were again appointed to superintend these meetings.¹⁰⁵ The church also appointed a white committee to consult the black members regarding the "selection of a person to preach for them," noting that the black people's decision would be "final."¹⁰⁶ When "bishop" Young, one of the church's most prominent leaders, consented to preach to the black members three times a month, the black members agreed to pay him an annual salary of \$130.¹⁰⁷ A series of elders and pastors were chosen to preach or simply supervise blacks at Sycamore Hill and Shoulder's Hill over the next several years. As discussed in Chapter 1, blacks at this church still exercised considerable autonomy despite white oversight. They decided whether to accept or reject black applicants for baptism, elected their own deacons, and frequently tried members in disciplinary cases, voting to retain, exclude, and restore them to fellowship. White leaders regularly "confirmed" these

¹⁰³ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. and Jul. 1844. See Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 101-05, and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212-19 for discussions of "bush arbors," also known as "hush harbors"; see also Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 41-43, and Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 169-72.

¹⁰⁴ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 1848.

¹⁰⁵ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. and Dec. 1848, Jan., Mar., Apr., May, Jun., Sept. 1849, Mar., May, Jun., 1850. See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, p. 104, for further discussion of this case.

¹⁰⁶ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1849.

¹⁰⁷ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1850, Jul. 1852, Jul. 1853, Jul. and Aug., 1854, Aug. 1855, Jun. and Jul. 1856, Oct., 1858, Oct. 1860, Sept. 1862.

actions. The black members again were sometimes allowed a voice in selecting their white preachers and paying their salaries as well.¹⁰⁸

When whites at Upper King and Queen Church felt that black members were becoming “disorderly,” they recommended that a church committee collaborate with a local justice of the peace to form a “patrol” in 1840.¹⁰⁹ This decision probably stemmed from the church’s continual concerns about Sunday-morning trading, particularly of “spirituous liquors,” among whites and blacks in front of the meeting house.¹¹⁰ Over the next several years, the church appointed black deacons to assist in keeping “good order” among the black members, voted to build a separate section of the meeting house for them, updated neglected rosters of black members, and set up regular religious instruction.¹¹¹ This church, prompted by worries about white behavior as well as black, was clearly one of the most organized and rigorous in its oversight.

Some churches waited until long after the post-Turner legislation passed to formalize plans for blacks’ religious instruction. In 1851, Four Mile Creek of Henrico County appointed a committee to ascertain how “meetings for the benefit of the coloured people could be held in accordance with the law.”¹¹² Perhaps this motion referred to the laws of 1848, although even this would seem a significantly delayed response to the

¹⁰⁸ For a few examples, see Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb., Mar. and Sept. 1854, as well as Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁹ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1836-1855, Jun. 28, 184.

¹¹⁰ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1815-1836, Mar. 1834, Jul. 16, 1836, VBHS; Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1836-1855, Jul. 20 and Aug. 17, 1839. Around this time, the Dover Baptist Association actually petitioned the Virginia legislature to restrict the selling of “cakes, confectionary, and intoxicating liquors” in front of church buildings, which caused “disgraceful and distressing interruptions” in public worship. Virginia General Assembly, legislative petitions to the General Assembly, Jan. 11, 1838, microfilm reel 122, Mathews County, 1796-1861, state government records collection, LVA.

¹¹¹ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1836-1855, Jun. 15, 1839, Apr. 17 and Aug. 2, 1840, Jun. 19, 1841, Jul. 16, 1843, Sept. and Oct. 18, 1845, Jul. 17 and Sept. 1847, May 27, Jun. 17, 1848, Mar. 15, May 17, 1851.

¹¹² Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1848-1884, Dec. 27, 1851, VBHS.

state's racial code. In Hanover County, Mount Olivet Baptist did not set up a standing committee for blacks' religious instruction until 1858, even though black men and women had attended the church since its establishment ten years earlier. In addition, the church appointed five enslaved deacons soon after setting up the standing committee, showing a desire to commission black leaders to help oversee that part of the congregation.¹¹³ The Emmaus and Colosse churches, home to a long-standing black deaconry, organized formal instruction of blacks only in the late 1850s. Emmaus formed a "committee of investigation" into the spiritual lives of its black members in 1857 and appointed a white preacher to lead them once a month.¹¹⁴ Colosse's plan of 1859 included white-led gatherings in which blacks could be called to "pray, exhort, or sing" before the group—violating the state's prohibition against black exhorters.¹¹⁵ Perhaps such delayed measures regulating black worship reflected an awareness of the mounting North-South tensions and the heightened pitch of northern criticisms of slaveholding Christianity during the late 1850s.¹¹⁶

The variety of racial policies at churches such as these demonstrates the variable and circuitous path white southern Baptists took toward reforming spiritual instruction for blacks and overseeing black religious activity. Some churches were quick to implement strict white monitoring following the Turner rebellion. But others waited years to establish a specific plan for supervising enslaved and free black members. The minutes of still other bodies do not mention any type of organized instruction. All this suggests that racial dynamics could be fluid and unpredictable in evangelical circles.

¹¹³ Mount Olivet Baptist Church Minute Book, 1847-1870, Jun. 19 and Jul. 17, 1858, VBHS.

¹¹⁴ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, 1856-1871, Apr. and May, 1857.

¹¹⁵ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, 1814-1870, Jul. and Aug. 1859.

¹¹⁶ Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom*, 111-17.

Moreover, even if churches set up committees and programs to oversee black men and women, the degree to which they regularly enforced their own policies remains uncertain. The repeated calls for oversight in the minutes of the Dover and Portsmouth Associations reveal a recurring perception that the goals of the General and regional Baptist bodies were not pursued with enough fervor at the local level.

Despite the Baptist attachment to congregational independence, Virginia's Baptist associations continually attempted to promote uniform policies regarding enslaved and free black worship, fearing the influence of unregulated preaching on black congregants. Although white Baptists were certainly concerned with preventing rebellious, or merely "disorderly," behavior among black members, and though they supported—whether explicitly or implicitly—the existing social hierarchy, their main concern seems to have been the propagation of orthodox doctrine in slave and free black communities.¹¹⁷

Dover delegate S.S. Sumner pleaded with his associates in 1842 to secure "judicious and intelligent" white preachers for black members, who "at the hands of those of their own color" were "blinded by...pretended visions" and "fitted in too many instances to be blind leaders of the blind."¹¹⁸ At its meeting in 1849, the association adopted yet another committee report—compiled in part by white pastor Robert Ryland of First African Baptist Church—on the "Religious Improvement of the Colored People,"

¹¹⁷ For a discussion of the importance of sound and unified doctrine in antebellum southern Baptist churches, see Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 84-97. Of course, as Daly argues, racism played a significant part in the religious education of slaves and free blacks; white evangelicals often categorized blacks as morally inferior and incapable of autonomous self-discipline, but, like children, especially open to proper religious training guided by whites. Daly, *When Slavery Was Called Freedom*, 84-88. See the Rappahannock Baptist Association minutes of 1851 and 1852 for clear examples of this mindset. *Minutes of the...Rappahannock Baptist Association...1851*, 15-16; *Minutes of the...Rappahannock Baptist Association...1852*, 12-14.

¹¹⁸ *Minutes of the... Dover Baptist Association...1842*, 16.

describing black members' supposed need for simple, didactic sermons with "apt illustrations" to "preach away all their notions of sights and sounds" and "superstitions about God's teaching."¹¹⁹ Over the next decade, delegates reiterated the need for supervised religious instruction in at least three more yearly meetings, revealing that a significant number of churches had yet to heed the association's counsel fully.¹²⁰

In the annual minutes of the Portsmouth and Dover associations, these recommendations and reports were generally nestled among the reports of other committees on education, temperance, foreign and domestic missions, Sabbath schools, and Bible and tract distribution, indicating that attention to religious instruction for blacks paralleled that paid to these other "benevolent" concerns. In his detailed address of 1850, Portsmouth delegate R.H. Land spoke first about the need for religious teaching for blacks and then discussed the "best method" of achieving this aim. Land included a section urging churches to provide "ample accommodations" for blacks to sit in sanctuaries, regretting that some churches had only set aside a "mere nook" for the black members. He then reminded listeners of Christ's well-known charge, "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these...ye have done it unto me."¹²¹ Eight years later, elder G.W. Keesee presented a report indicating that at least some churches had still neglected to implement a satisfactory plan for black members. Disappointed in the "indifference" of certain white Baptists toward the topic, he lamented that many blacks had "grown old in ignorance."¹²²

¹¹⁹ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1849*, 14-15.

¹²⁰ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1850*, 9-11; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1856*, 23; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 18.

¹²¹ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Bap. Association...1850*, 13-15.

¹²² *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1858*, 11-12, italics in the original.

Keesee also admitted that Virginia's laws had made instruction difficult by depriving most blacks of access to literacy.¹²³ To illiterate black churchgoers, the "living voice" was the only authorized method of religious training.¹²⁴ Like other evangelicals, Baptists placed a strong emphasis on scriptural literacy for all members, and they campaigned to get Bibles into the hands of slaves and free blacks who already knew how to read. In 1847, a Dover committee recommended that the association embrace a ruling of the Virginia and Foreign Bible Society regarding the "gratuitous [free] distribution" of Bibles to literate blacks who were unable to afford them.¹²⁵ Likewise, Portsmouth supported the Bible Society's project and advised its churches to help implement it.¹²⁶ In 1850, Upper King and Queen Church appointed a committee to ascertain the number of literate slaves in the community, what portion of that number already owned Bibles, and what portion were members of the church. The committee reported that four or five "colored persons" in the area (presumably literate), along with twenty-six white families, lacked Bibles or testaments. The church instructed the committee to find Bibles for these people.¹²⁷

Scholar Janet Cornelius has studied the ways in which, despite legal restraints, blacks learned to read in the antebellum South. To many white evangelicals, she notes,

¹²³ Acts of the General Assembly, 1831, Chap. XXXIX:4-6, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia... One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1831), 107-08; Criminal Code, 1848, Chap. 120: Chap. X:40, *Acts of the General Assembly of Virginia ... 1848...*, 120; *Code of Virginia... 1849*, Chap. CXCVIII:32, p. 748. Virginia law prohibited slaves and free blacks from assembling "for the purpose of instruction in reading and writing," but did not bar blacks from learning to read and write by other means.

¹²⁴ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1858*, 11-12.

¹²⁵ *Minutes of the... Dover Baptist Association... 1847*, 8.

¹²⁶ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1848*, 10; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1849*, 16.

¹²⁷ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1836-1855, Mar. 16 and Jun. 15, 1850. By this point, Upper King and Queen was part of the Rappahannock Baptist Association, an offshoot of the Dover Association. Similar to Dover and Portsmouth, the Rappahannock Association implemented a "Committee on the Bible" for slaves.

these restrictions “ran counter to the centuries-old tradition that the word of God should be accessible to all people and that Bible literacy would promote order, decorum, and morality.” Some whites, “who, influenced by the spirit of reform but accepting accommodation to the slave system, sought to reconcile both by fashioning a white-dominated mission to slaves” that included instruction in literacy.¹²⁸ Margaret Douglass of Norfolk, for instance, spoke out against the anti-literacy legislation and was even briefly jailed for teaching blacks to read at a Sabbath school in Christ Episcopal Church. Yet according to local records, Douglass’s imprisonment seems an exception; more often than not, white evangelicals were not prosecuted for violating these laws.¹²⁹

The subject of black literacy and Bible distribution aptly highlights the nuances of southern evangelicalism and its relationship to the prevailing social structure and civil legislation.¹³⁰ Some white evangelicals were willing to teach blacks to read, some protested state legislation that made it difficult to do so, and some campaigned to raise funds for the “Bibles for Slaves” project—all within the context of the southern “missions to the slaves” launched by Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists who aimed

¹²⁸ Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *“When I Can Read My Title Clear”*: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1991), 34-35; see also Cornelius, *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 97-100, 141-42, and Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 67, 72-73.

¹²⁹ Cornelius, *“When I Can Read,”* 34. For a more detailed study of the school at Christ Church and Margaret Douglass’s trial, see Tommy L. Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1780-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1997), 138-45. See also Carl Degler’s account of Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford’s school for slaves in Fredericksburg in Delger, *The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 33.

¹³⁰ Willie Lee Rose asserted that most attacks in the South against laws restricting slave literacy “were based on the Protestant idea that to save their souls men had to read and interpret the Bible for themselves.” According to Rose, “the same religious reason was advanced by those who wanted slave marriages to carry the same civil effects as marriages among whites.” “Neither drive won numerous converts, however,” she concluded, “because each flew in the face of social control and endangered foundations of the social order.” Rose, “The Domestication of Domestic Slavery,” in Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom*, ed. William W. Freehling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 27-28.

to formalize religious instruction for blacks.¹³¹ As Cornelius concludes, despite the North-South schism within the churches, these white evangelical southerners still allied themselves with a national millennial movement of Christian benevolence and pointed to the religious instruction of slaves and free blacks as one of the highest callings of a southern believer. African Americans actively took advantage of these opportunities, advancing their spiritual and temporal education and maintaining positions of leadership in evangelical communities.¹³² And some of these black Christians, motivated by their evangelical faith, acquired literacy wholly through their own efforts. Cornelius cites Thomas Johnson, an enslaved Richmond tobacco factory worker who joined one of the black Baptist churches in the city during the 1850s and taught himself how to read the Bible.¹³³

Baptist leaders promoted the use of scriptural catechisms for the oral instruction of black believers, particularly for those who could not read. In 1847, while serving as pastor of First African Baptist in Richmond, Robert Ryland recommended catechetical training to the Dover Association, noting that the simple question-answer format would best “occupy” the minds of black Christians. In this report, Ryland also listed ways for pastors to “excite interest” among black members, including short pauses in sermons to sing hymn stanzas or ask questions.¹³⁴ The following year, Ryland published his own *Scripture Catechism for Coloured People*, which became a central part of the curriculum at First African, even serving, in the opinion of Charles Irons, as a “thinly veiled literacy

¹³¹ Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 28-32. For the Methodists’ role in spearheading the “Mission to the Slaves” movement across the South, see Donald G. Mathews, “The Methodist Mission to the Slaves, 1829-1844,” *Journal of American History* 51 (Mar. 1965), 615-31; also see Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 46-68; Tise, *Proslavery*, 291-307.

¹³² Cornelius, “*When I Can Read*,” 106-14; Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 2-3, 28-32.

¹³³ Thomas Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave* (Bournemouth, Eng.: W. Mate & Sons, 1909), 17-19, cited in Cornelius, “*When I Can Read*,” 59-61.

¹³⁴ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1847*, 14-15.

program.”¹³⁵ Ryland’s catechism joined others, such as that of Georgia Presbyterian reformer Charles Colcock Jones, in supplying educational material for black Sunday schools throughout the South.¹³⁶ In his preface, Ryland described how he “enjoyed the privilege of giving instruction to an African church”; he commended the catechism to other pastors and teachers “for the good of the coloured race” and to the “blessing of that God who is no respecter of persons,” specifically applying the Biblical principle that God does not show partiality or favoritism to the question of race.¹³⁷

Even a cursory look at Ryland’s table of contents indicates that he sought to instruct his pupils in the entire scope of scripture and not only on the passages concerning slaves’ duties to their masters. His long list of topics included heady theological issues such as “The Truth and Justice of God,” “The Goodness and Mercy of God,” “The Death of Christ, an Atonement,” “Repentance,” “Faith,” and “Justification,” as well as sections on “Church Discipline” and “Christian Deportment.” In the section on “Relative Duties,” Ryland uses Paul’s epistles to illustrate the proper roles of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants.

Since Ryland’s work covered the entire span of Christian theology, only the catechism’s title identifies it as a document for black believers. However paternalistic he may have been, Ryland was interested in presenting the same doctrine to black as to white Christians.¹³⁸ Members of both Baptist associations gave their approval to the

¹³⁵ Charles F. Irons, “And All These Things Shall Be Added Unto You: The First African Baptist Church, Richmond, 1841-1865,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 47 (Winter 1998), 29.

¹³⁶ For discussion of other contemporary catechisms and instructive material, see Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes, in the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), 264-67.

¹³⁷ Robert Ryland, *The Scripture Catechism, For Coloured People* (Richmond: Harrold & Murray, 1848), iii-iv, Special Collections, LVA. For scripture references for “God is no respecter if persons,” see Acts 10:34-35 and James 2:9.

¹³⁸ See Milton Sernett’s similar contention that the catechisms of plantation missionaries such as William Capers and Charles C. Jones were also used for the instruction of non-slaves, such as Jones’s own

publication. Portsmouth recommended it as a “valuable help” and promoted its use for oral instruction in “colored” Sunday schools.¹³⁹ In his report of 1858, Keesee endorsed Ryland’s catechism and also encouraged pastors and teachers to read “simple passages,” especially from the Gospels, Acts, and “historic parts of the Old Testament,” to black congregants and students; he also advocated memorization of scriptural passages and hymns.¹⁴⁰

One of the central goals of antebellum Baptist reform was the establishment of Sabbath schools in local churches. By the 1830s, almost one-third of the churches in the Dover Association operated schools, and that number continued to climb both there and in the Portsmouth Association as committees promoted these institutions over the next couple decades.¹⁴¹ Association records did not reflect much white interest in setting up Sabbath schools for black members or in black churches through the 1830s, but by the 1840s and 1850s, both associations were advocating such programs for blacks as well as whites. R.H. Land argued that, since state laws forbade whites to teach blacks to read—an exaggeration, as state laws prevented slaves and free blacks from *assembling* for instruction in literacy but did not prohibit the teaching of individuals—Sunday schools should be established to provide regular oral instruction. He cited a school in Penfield, Georgia, enrolling almost one hundred black men, women, and children as an example

children, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism*, 66; see also Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 130, Tise, *Proslavery*, 299-301.

¹³⁹ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1849*, 16.

¹⁴⁰ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1858*, 11-12.

¹⁴¹ For some examples of reports and campaigns for Sabbath Schools, see *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1832*, 20; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1836*, 14-19; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1837*, 10-15; *Minutes of the Dover Baptist Association... 1839*, 10; *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1830*, 6; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1844*, 6; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1846*, 10-11; *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1861*, 11; see also Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

for Virginia Baptists.¹⁴² Keesee's report included a section on black Sabbath schools as well, noting that "the most hopeful field of labor is among the *young*," and that the "arguments for early religious training in Sunday schools will apply with equal force to colored as to white children."¹⁴³ Mrs. M.M. Jeffries of Mattaponi Baptist apparently agreed; she began holding a Sabbath school for black members at the church on Sunday evenings in 1862.¹⁴⁴

Black church leaders also supported the establishment of Sabbath schools. As early as 1826, the deacons of Gillfield Baptist endorsed the Portsmouth Association's promotion of the institution.¹⁴⁵ Although the minutes do not indicate whether Gillfield's leaders set up a school following this meeting, considering their discussion of it, it is likely that they started some kind of educational program. If the church did form a school, it is unclear what became of it, because many years later, in 1860, a group of members suggested that the church create a "catechism school." The clerk noted that the subject would be "left to the Paster and deacons for arangemnt [sic]."¹⁴⁶ A month later, white pastor William Robinson proposed that the church open a school to meet each Sunday morning in the basement. The church voted to accept the measure and appointed him to "elect suitable members" from the congregation to lead it.¹⁴⁷ Gillfield's Sabbath school was soon up and running, and by April 1861 the children had managed to raise \$131.89 to donate to the church, which returned its "cincear thanks" to the pupils through

¹⁴² *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Bap. Association...1850*, 13-15; see footnote 123 above.

¹⁴³ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1858*, 11-12, italics in the original.

¹⁴⁴ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1854, Apr. 12, 1862, in W.T. Hundley, *History of Mattaponi Baptist Church: King and Queen County, Virginia* (Richmond: Appeals Press, 1928).

¹⁴⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1815-1831, May 21, 1826, VBHS.

¹⁴⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Oct. 7, 1860, Gillfield Baptist Church Records, 1827-1939, Accession #10041, microfilm reel M-1397, Small Special Collections Library, UVA.

¹⁴⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Nov. 4, 1860.

Pastor Robinson.¹⁴⁸ Later that year, the clerk noted that the “Sabbath School Society” had raised an additional \$10, and the church again thanked the group for its “benevolence.”¹⁴⁹

Though brief, the above entries tell a great deal about African American churches’ involvement in the larger southern evangelical culture. These black members took the initiative to launch an educational institution in their church despite the state’s long-standing ban. Second, the black leaders and white pastor worked together to start the school, demonstrating the persistence of cross-racial cooperation in Baptist circles. And finally, the development of the “catechism school” into a well-organized “Sabbath School Society” with “benevolent” contributions illustrates how antebellum evangelical groups developed into systematized institutions that could generate impressive amounts of money. The Sunday school at Gillfield had apparently become one of this rapidly expanding church’s most important programs.

In Richmond, First African also operated a Sabbath school for its members, superintended by Robert Ryland. The church’s records do not indicate when the school was formed, but in 1857 the minutes mention that it was meeting in the church basement.¹⁵⁰ By 1859, an average of 250 children were attending the school each week.¹⁵¹ One of those young people was Walter H. Brooks, later a well-known Baptist scholar and ordained minister of churches in Richmond and Washington, D.C.¹⁵² Toward the end of his life, Brooks remembered the crowded one-room Sunday school as “one of

¹⁴⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Apr. 7, 1861.

¹⁴⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Sept. 15, 1861.

¹⁵⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 4, 1857.

¹⁵¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, note of Sept. 11, 1859, located in front matter of minute book.

¹⁵² “Walter Henderson Brooks,” *Journal of Negro History* 30 (Oct. 1945), 459-61. For one of Brooks’ best known publications, see “The Evolution of the Negro Baptist Church,” *Journal of Negro History* 7 (Jan. 1922), 11-22.

the dearest institutions” he had known, praising Ryland as a “loving father,” a “friend of humanity,” and a “brother beloved in Jesus Christ.” Brooks recalled Ryland’s instruction, replete with hymn-singing, as “inspir[ing] hope for all that is best in this life, as well as for the life to come.”¹⁵³ Brooks’s remarks, although written long after his experiences at First African, indicate some level of religious fraternity between church members and Ryland. Together with the black deacons, Ryland provided scriptural training and spiritual discipline to young and old Afro-Virginian church members living in a society whose lawmakers attempted to stifle black education and constrain black religious activity.¹⁵⁴

Of all antebellum “benevolent” organizations and reforms, none linked the efforts of blacks and whites more than African colonization and missions. From its beginnings in the late eighteenth century, the colonization movement was marked by conflicting motivations and approaches among its adherents. Some black men and women welcomed the idea of leaving an American society characterized by racial enslavement, tension, and inequality. A number of black evangelicals viewed it as their sacred duty to bring Christianity to Africa and supported colonization for that reason. Still others, however, saw colonization as yet another cruel manifestation of America’s racist underpinnings—a scheme to rid a white-dominated society of its “problematic” free black population.

¹⁵³ Walter H. Brooks to Garnett Ryland, May 6, 1939, Una Roberts Lawrence Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee. Cornelius provides a brief excerpt of this letter in *Slave Missions*, p. 117, but the entire document is worth reading.

¹⁵⁴ Luther P. Jackson cites a Sunday school at First Norfolk (Bute Street) Baptist, led by six black teachers with a white pastor superintending. Jackson, “Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860,” *Journal of Negro History* 16 (Apr. 1931), 230. I was unable to locate Jackson’s manuscript source for the school: *History of Bute Street Sunday School*.

For whites, the spectrum of motivations proved just as wide. Some sincerely regarded colonization as the most salutary option for free blacks, who would suffer oppression so long as they remained in the United States. Certain white evangelicals, like their black brethren, latched onto colonization as an ideal route for missionary work. Many whites feared that the races could never peaceably coexist as free people in America and believed that republican government functioned best within a homogeneous population. And of course, the project of colonization attracted some of the most bigoted of white Americans, who wanted the government to spend large sums of money sending free blacks to live permanently on the other side of the Atlantic. More than a few white supporters of colonization espoused a mixture of these viewpoints in varying degrees.¹⁵⁵

Like other reform campaigns, colonization became increasingly organized in the early nineteenth century, most notably with the establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1816. As the project of several leading state and federal politicians, including Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Bushrod Washington, and John Randolph, the ACS found support across sectional lines and in the national government itself. The Society's continual attempts to incorporate members with divergent views of slavery as well as to solicit government funding contributed both to its successes and to its failures. Antislavery and proslavery figures both came to view the organization with suspicion and even hostility, while politicians tossed colonization about in debate and eventually dropped it from the federal budget altogether. Yet despite a series of setbacks

¹⁵⁵ Philip J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005); Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 98-102, 118-32; Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 159-74; Irons, "Zion in Black and White," 213-16.

in its complicated history, the ACS oversaw more than ten thousand emigrations during the antebellum years, along with the establishment of the colony of Liberia, which became a free state in 1847. The Society's "malleability," Eric Burin argues, made its survival possible, as colonization "meant different things to different people."¹⁵⁶

In Virginia, home to the second-largest population of free blacks in the country, colonization garnered significant support among whites and blacks alike.¹⁵⁷ Of all the states involved in colonization, Virginia boasted the highest number of free black emigrants.¹⁵⁸ As Eva Sheppard Wolf puts it, the movement "encapsulated all of white Virginians' ambivalence about slavery and emancipation" because it could "legitimately be viewed *both* as a form of antislavery and as a form of proslavery activity."¹⁵⁹ The crucial difference between these two wings of colonization lay in the fact that, while some whites perceived colonization as a means of promoting manumission, others hoped to evict those blacks who were already free while keeping the rest enslaved, thus further entrenching the system of racial slavery. White evangelicals, themselves somewhat conflicted over slavery and supportive of missionary activity, proved particularly interested in colonization. In 1826, the members of the Dover Baptist Association noted that they "cordially approved" of the ACS, as it seemed "well calculated for propagating

¹⁵⁶ Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution*, 7-33 and tables, quotation on 33; Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 3-8.

¹⁵⁷ According to the U.S. Federal Census of 1820, Maryland had the highest number of free blacks in the country, 39,730, and Virginia with the second highest at 37,189. *Census for 1820* (Washington, D.C., 1821), [18], available online at U.S. Census Bureau, "Census of Population and Housing," <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1820.html> (accessed Sept. 19, 2012).

¹⁵⁸ Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution*, tables.

¹⁵⁹ Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 170. See also Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Road from Monticello: A Study of the Virginia Slavery Debate of 1832* (New York: AMS Press, 1941), 10-11, 53, and O'Brion, "A Mighty Fortress," 95-97.

the gospel of Christ in that benighted region [of Africa] as well as for other benevolent purposes.”¹⁶⁰

The ACS operated at the local level through auxiliary societies, and Virginia was home to many such groups, particularly in urban areas. The most prominent of these, the Richmond-Manchester Auxiliary, included city merchants, evangelicals, and reformers among its leaders and donors. According to Marie Tyler-McGraw, the work of these agents showed “their relationships with emigrants to be businesslike, mildly paternal, and premised on shared values and religious beliefs.”¹⁶¹ As Virginia’s slaveholders and legislators became increasingly wary of national colonization efforts as emancipationist or antislavery, however, the Richmond auxiliary chose to reorganize as the Virginia Colonization Society in 1828. While it still maintained ties and sent contributions to the ACS, the VCS now directly oversaw the state’s colonization enterprise, controlling its own treasury and meetings and holding authority over local organizations.¹⁶²

A few years later, Nat Turner’s uprising sparked a heated debate among Virginia politicians over the future of slavery, the prospect of new black laws, and the colonization “solution.” Some legislators actually proposed the forcible emigration of all free blacks to Africa, and while the General Assembly did not agree to this measure, stricter racial codes were enacted against those blacks who chose not to leave.¹⁶³ Whether fearing their black neighbors or fearing *for* them, however, many white Virginians continued to regard voluntary colonization as the best option. As evidence of the enduring influence of the

¹⁶⁰ *Minutes of the Baptist Dover Association...1826*, 10.

¹⁶¹ Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 42.

¹⁶² Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 3-8, 44-45; Elizabeth R. Varon, “Evangelical Womanhood and the Politics of the African Colonization Movement in Virginia,” in McKivigan and Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*, 169-95, especially 175.

¹⁶³ Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 173-93; Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 46-47.

ACS in Virginia, the Portsmouth Association expressed its support for the national society in 1833, urging its churches to assist “by every means in their power” this “effort of benevolence.”¹⁶⁴ This discussion of the ACS was situated among reports from other benevolent groups, including the Baptist General Tract Society and the Virginia Baptist Education Society, indicating a connection to the larger reformist impulse of the period.

For many southern white evangelicals, colonization was the cause in which their reform goals could clearly merge: the amelioration of slavery, black religious instruction, and far-reaching missionary endeavors. As Janet Cornelius has shown, the colonization movement gave white religious leaders and slaveholders an incentive to train blacks in literacy. The strong opposition that colonization evoked from black and northern white antislavery people at the time has caused historians to “overlook general support for the movement among reform-minded white Southerners” as well as to ignore ways that they used it to “justify slave literacy, emancipation, and black education.”¹⁶⁵ Despite the mixed motives of colonizationists and the increasingly proslavery leanings of many in that group, colonizationism created significant opportunities for antebellum blacks.

Afro-Virginians, like blacks in other states, divided sharply over the issue of colonization, ranging from enthusiastic support to an all-out rejection of the movement. One has only to peruse the pages of the *African Repository*, the monthly journal of the ACS, to find lists of numerous emigrants, already free or recently manumitted, who chose to embark from Norfolk to Liberia.¹⁶⁶ In January 1829, Richmond’s First Baptist Church provided letters of dismission to six black men and four black women who wished to move to Africa. Among them was Gilbert Hunt, later a controversial deacon at First

¹⁶⁴ *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1833*, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Cornelius, “*When I Can Read*,” 117-19, quotation on 117.

¹⁶⁶ Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 63-81.

African whose activities are examined at length in Chapter 2. Dissatisfied with Liberia, Hunt returned to Virginia within a year of his departure, and, to the chagrin of colonization officials, spread negative reports about the colony.¹⁶⁷ While some slaves, like Hunt, purchased their freedom before traveling to Africa, others were freed in groups by a master's will and made the voyage together. Such was the case for "Smith's Simon" and his "fellow servants" who received letters of dismissal from Raccoon Swamp Church in 1837.¹⁶⁸ In other cases, emigrants had been born free, like Mary Deans, the wife of celebrated member Isaac Deans of Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church, discussed in Chapter 1. Isaac purchased his own freedom, but the *African Repository's* passenger list of the *Linda Stewart*—which sailed in 1853—notes that Mary, along with many others on that ship, was originally free.¹⁶⁹

The Deans family's emigration was part of a resurgence of blacks' interest in colonization during the 1850s. The influence of the ACS and the VCS had waned significantly during the 1830s and 1840s, but with the passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Act and heightened state restrictions on free blacks, many black Virginians began to consider colonization anew. Portsmouth Baptist Church, for instance, dismissed eight black members to settle in Liberia in 1852.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, throughout the antebellum period, the missionary impulse remained a considerable force in drawing black men and

¹⁶⁷ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 15, 1829; Marie Tyler-McGraw, "Richmond Free Blacks and African Colonization, 1816-1832," *Journal of American Studies* 21 (Aug. 1987), 207-24. For more on Gilbert Hunt, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp. 199-203.

¹⁶⁸ Raccoon Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1772-1837, Jun. 10, 1837, LVA.

¹⁶⁹ *The African Repository*, 29 (Jan. 1853), 28; the passenger list also indicates that Isaac could read and that Mary could both read and write. The couple traveled with their son John, also literate, whom Isaac had to purchase out of slavery, despite the fact that Mary was born free; perhaps John was a stepson of Mary. See also Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. and Nov. 1852, and Chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp. 77-79.

¹⁷⁰ Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution*, 7-33; Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 79-80; Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1853, Nov. 12, 1852.

women to West Africa. From Liberia's early days, black Virginians took a leading role in initiating and sustaining missionary efforts there.

In 1815, blacks from various Richmond churches joined with white Baptist William Crane to form the Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society. Crane and white minister David Roper had formed a small school for blacks in the city which met three evenings a week. One of Crane's students, Lott Cary, helped William Crane and his brother James to launch the Missionary Society out of these classes, and the Society became an auxiliary of the national Baptist General Convention.¹⁷¹ Formerly a slave in Charles City County, Cary was hired out to work in Richmond around 1804, joined First Baptist Church a few years later, and purchased his freedom and that of his children in 1813.¹⁷² Both Cary and free black saddle and harness maker Colin Teage served, along with the Cranes and other white Baptists, as leaders of the missionary organization.¹⁷³

Cary and Teage earnestly desired to emigrate to Africa, and William Crane assisted them in procuring the sponsorship of the American Colonization Society and the Baptist General Convention. Supporters raised several hundred dollars to send the two black preachers—the first foreign missionaries from Virginia—abroad.¹⁷⁴ Early in 1821, Cary and Teage were ordained as part of the new Providence Baptist Church, a body of

¹⁷¹ Alley, *History of Baptists in Virginia*, 148; H.A. Tupper, "The Church in its Relation to Missions," in *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond Virginia, 1780-1880* (Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), 221-23; Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 41; J. B. Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary, Late Missionary to Africa* (Baltimore: Armstrong and Berry, 1837), 14-15, available online at DocSouth, added 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/taylor/taylor.html> (accessed Apr. 14, 2010).

¹⁷² Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary*, 10-14.

¹⁷³ Tupper, "Church in its Relation to Missions," 222; Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary*, 19. "Colin" is alternatively spelled "Collin" in different sources; "Cary" is also spelled "Carey."

¹⁷⁴ Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary*, 17-27; Tupper, "Church in its Relation to Missions," 223; Alley, *History of Baptists in Virginia*, 159-60.

seven free blacks that had organized itself in Crane's home under the leadership of David Roper. The members of this church soon set sail for Africa aboard the *Nautilus*.¹⁷⁵

Accompanied by their families, the two missionaries served in a variety of capacities in Liberia—as ministers, teachers, merchants, promoters of colonization, and political leaders. In addition to developing Providence Baptist Church, they started a missionary school for local children. Cary also trained to become a physician while living in Liberia. Cary's letters to William Crane and the Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society provided encouraging news about the colony's progress and exhorted other blacks to leave the racial oppression of America to spread Christianity to Africans. In 1826, pleased with Cary's service and promotion of Liberia, the American Colonization Society appointed him as vice agent of the colony. Cary later served as a temporary governor and would probably have filled the office permanently had his life not been cut short in 1828 by a gunpowder explosion that occurred when the settlers were preparing to defend the colony against indigenous people and slave traders.¹⁷⁶

Other black Virginians followed Cary and Teage in working to fill the religious, political, and economic needs of the settlement in Liberia. Colston Waring, for instance, a trustee and preacher from Gillfield Baptist, secured the sponsorship of the Petersburg African Baptist Missionary Society and led his family and almost a hundred Petersburg free blacks to settle in Liberia in 1824. Waring went on to serve as pastor of Providence

¹⁷⁵ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 303; Tom W. Shick, "Rhetoric and Reality: Colonization and Afro-American Missionaries in Early Nineteenth-Century Liberia," in *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa*, ed. Sylvia M. Jacobs, 51 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary*, 27-28.

¹⁷⁶ Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary*, 42-75, 90-93; Ralph Randolph Gurley, "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Cary," in *Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia* (Washington, D.C.: James C. Dunn, 1835), 147-60, available online at DocSouth, added 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gurley/gurley.html> (accessed Apr. 14, 2010).

Baptist Church and vice agent of the colony after Cary's death.¹⁷⁷ Black leaders John Day and John Cheeseman both operated as missionaries and educators for the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign Mission Board after its separation from northern Baptists and during colonization's renaissance in the 1850s.¹⁷⁸

Life in West Africa often proved arduous, and although white Baptists also served as missionaries there, the Dover Association expressed a hesitancy in 1850 to sponsor any more white missionaries, as the climate seemed to dictate their "certain and speedy death." Dover urged its members to "induce" more "gifted colored brethren of approved piety," whose "physical constitution" they thought better suited to resist disease, to resettle in Liberia; the association expressed the hope that "another Lott Cary and Colin Teague [would] be found to go to assist brethren Cheeseman, and Day, in leading their benighted countrymen to the true God."¹⁷⁹ The author's recognition of four leading African American colonizers demonstrates the degree to which white Baptists relied on blacks' participation in this joint missionizing work. Yet at the same time, the use of the phrase "their countrymen" to describe African peoples indicates the limits of that partnership: whites still saw black missionaries as a separate group of reformers.

While black missionaries served under the sponsorship of various white-led mission boards, black churches also supported their efforts. The large membership of First African of Richmond was able to amass significant funds for individual

¹⁷⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1815-1831, Nov. 4, 1815; Tyler-McGraw, *African Republic*, 69, 154-55; Alley, *History of Baptists in Virginia*, 159-60.

¹⁷⁸ Sandy Dwayne Martin, "Black Baptists, Foreign Missions, and African Colonization, 1814-1882," in *Black Americans*, ed. Jacobs, 68-73; Thomas Alexander Kinchen, Jr., "'Africa is Doubtless to Be Evangelized': Assessing Southern Baptist Mission Focus, Education, and Spiritual Awakening Among Liberians, 1846-1880, Through an Examination of the Ministries of John Day, John H. Cheeseman, and Boston J. Drayton" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 54-128; *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1848*, 6; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1849*, 13.

¹⁷⁹ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1850*, 8.

missionaries. In 1843, the church voted to support deacon Thomas Allen in his “ardent desire” to preach the gospel in Africa, including offering assistance to purchase his freedom. Impressed by Allen’s “upright deportment and christian spirit,” the church also urged him to solicit aid from “friends” in other Virginia cities and to organize “societies” for his “future support.” Allen’s venture, however, took an unexpected turn. As a free man, he applied to the American Baptist Board of Foreign Missions in Boston, but was turned down because the Board apparently lacked adequate funding and wished Allen to develop his qualifications before traveling abroad. He wrote to First African of this setback but explained to the disappointed church that he had found employment as a pastor in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The church agreed to grant him a “cordial dismissal.”¹⁸⁰

The leaders and members of First African rallied around former Lutheran minister Boston Drayton, baptized into the church in March 1847. Soon after Drayton’s baptism, Ryland and the deacons requested him to “appear before the church” to present his “christian experience, his call to the ministry, & his doctrines” in order to obtain a preaching license as a missionary to Liberia. When the members were “satisfied” with Drayton’s answers, Ryland quickly scheduled an ordination to take place before his departure for Africa. A formal ceremony, led by a white presbytery, took place on June 6 before a “crowded and deeply affected audience.” Drayton then sailed as the first black missionary of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. Once again, a partnership—albeit unequal—between whites and blacks and between leadership and laity had taken shape at First African. While white leaders held the final authority in ordaining Drayton,

¹⁸⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 5, 1843, Apr. 6, 1845.

the black deacons and members did play a notable role in supporting and preparing him for the ministry.¹⁸¹

When Burell Mann, an enslaved tobacco factory worker and Methodist in Richmond, felt a call to preach in Liberia, he wrote a series of letters to the American Colonization Society between 1847 and 1849 requesting assistance. Rebuffed by Methodist leaders who refused to raise money to free him, Mann sought help from white Baptist pastors J.B. Taylor and Robert Ryland, along with the congregation of First African. At that point, Mann informed the ACS that he was “more willing” to serve under the sponsorship of the Southern Baptist Mission Board than under the Southern Methodists. First African agreed to send him as “their” missionary and agreed to help him “Raise a Subscription Paper” to collect money for his freedom. Some members were willing to donate money from their own resources; others offered to aid him by “begging.” Ryland also promised to give money and serve as Mann’s “Agent.” Still, the Baptists did not raise enough funds, and Mann continued to petition the ACS to supply the remainder. He even proposed that the organization “sell [him] again, to any Citizen in Richmond,” if he failed to pay back the debt, but the ACS apparently did not consent to purchase his freedom.¹⁸² Despite this unhappy outcome, Mann’s persistence and resourcefulness attest the zeal of certain black evangelicals for mission work, as well as the willingness of some black and white church members to sponsor them jointly.

¹⁸¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Mar. 21, May 16 and 30, Jun. 6, 1847; Kinchen, “Africa is Doubtless to Be Evangelized,” 129-57.

¹⁸² Burell (or Bureel) W. Mann to the American Colonization Society, Jun. 21, Nov. 21 and 28, Dec. 6 and 28, 1847; Jan. 1 and 5, 1848; Mar. 4, 1849, in *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860*, ed. Carter G. Woodson, 15-16, 26-28, 32-35, 46-47 (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc, 1926).

Other aspiring emigrants also applied for aid from the Richmond congregation. Wanting to purchase his freedom and preach in Africa, enslaved member Andrew Morton requested and received a “letter of commendation” to bring to other churches, no doubt in an attempt to raise funds.¹⁸³ The collections from services on November 5, 1854, were designated for “Brother” Elliot of Norfolk who was trying to free his wife and children before traveling to Liberia, although it is not clear whether Elliot was traveling as a missionary or simply as an emigrant.¹⁸⁴ When a “Doctor Walker” of Petersburg declared his intention to serve as a missionary in 1857, the church “recommended” him to the “confidence of the friends of benevolence both white & colored.”¹⁸⁵ While the race of this man and his status as a member or a visitor are unclear, the fact that “friends of benevolence” of both races were called to support him is worth noting.

Even in mixed-race churches, African mission work was by far the most popular benevolent cause among black Baptist donors. At Mattaponi Baptist Church, black members faithfully contributed to the “African Mission” throughout the 1850s.¹⁸⁶ In 1857, blacks at Shoulder’s Hill contributed forty dollars for African missions, which constituted 40 percent of the congregation’s entire fund for all foreign missions.¹⁸⁷ Likewise, blacks at Suffolk Baptist sometimes gave just as much as whites to foreign missions, and the clerk of Upper King and Queen Church recorded several collections “from the colored friends” for African missions before and during the Civil War.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 3, 1853.

¹⁸⁴ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 5, 1854.

¹⁸⁵ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 3, 1857.

¹⁸⁶ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1875, Jun. 7, 1856, Jun. 13, 1857, Jul. 10, 1858, Jun. 9, 1860, in Hundley, *History of Mattaponi Baptist Church*.

¹⁸⁷ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 1857. See also Treasurer’s Reports for 1858 and 1859, Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book.

¹⁸⁸ Black members gave \$11 to foreign missions, white members gave \$10, and Sunday school students and teachers gave \$9, Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1854, Jun. 14, 1851. The following year,

Black churches, too, joined Richmond's First African congregation in providing considerable financial support to missionary organizations. In 1843, Gilbert Hunt brought \$95.40 from First African's missionary society to the General Association meeting; the average church or individual contribution for mission funds was about \$15 that year.¹⁸⁹ Even after southern white Baptists split off from the national missionary organization over slavery, blacks still sent money to the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign Mission Board after its establishment in 1845.¹⁹⁰ Clearly, many black and white Baptists shared an evangelical agenda for foreign missionary work. Since church and associational minutes generally did not chart the particular regions to which whites contributed missionary funds, it is unclear to what degree white Baptists in Tidewater Virginia gave money for African missions. Yet while whites may not have contributed specifically to African missions as often as blacks did, the blacks' contributions and the whites' frequent acknowledgment of them—as well as white leaders' continued calls for missionaries to travel to Africa—testifies to a shared desire to Christianize foreign lands.

While black Baptists pledged their financial support primarily to African missions, they did join whites in supporting domestic causes from time to time. Members of the Bank Street Church in Norfolk, along with Gillfield in Petersburg, sent money to the Portsmouth Association's Domestic Mission and Itinerant Funds during the 1840s

black members gave \$5.25 to the foreign mission fund, and Sunday school students and teachers gave \$4.75, Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1854, May 1852, see also Mar. 18, 1854; Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1836-1855, May 19, 1849, Jun. 15, 1850, May 18, Jun. 14, 1861, May 16, 1863. See also Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1853, May 7, 1847; Fairfields Baptist Church Minute Book, letter to Rappahannock Association, 1847; and Mount Olivet Baptist Church Minute Book, 1847-1870, May 16, 1852, for other significant contributions to African missions.

¹⁸⁹ *Proceedings of the...Baptist General Association...1844*, 21, 23. For examples of Gillfield Baptist's contributions to foreign and home missions, as well as the meetings of their own missionary society, see Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Mar. 2, 1844, Apr. 3, 1858, and Jan. 2 and Mar. 20, 1859.

¹⁹⁰ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1856*, 15.

and 1850s. Gillfield's members contributed money toward the association's colportage campaign, in which traveling volunteers would distribute religious tracts and literature to local households. First African even took up collections for the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission.¹⁹¹ Christianizing slaves was a particular focus for southern white evangelicals, and a large portion of the Baptists' domestic funds no doubt went to support that cause. Thus, black Baptists' contributions to "Home Missions" in effect lent support to an evangelical effort that upheld the legitimacy of slavery.¹⁹² This connection may have deterred some black churches and individuals from sending money, but those who did so probably saw their donations aiding a larger movement to advance Christian doctrine in all areas of society.¹⁹³

Other facets of benevolent reform also caught the attention of African American Baptists. Although not as widely popular as among white evangelicals, the temperance movement did gain support from some black churchgoers. First Baptist of Richmond, for instance, voted that "use of the meeting house be given to the coloured members" to hold their temperance meeting in December 1835.¹⁹⁴ The Dover Association celebrated its

¹⁹¹ *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1847*, 20-21; *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1848*, 18-19; *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1849*, 18-19; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Mar. 2, 1844; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1853, May 2, 1852, UVA; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, May 11, 1857, May 9, 1858, May 1, 1859; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jan. 6 and Feb. 17, 1856. For more about colportage, see Kuykendall, *Southern Enterprise*, 112-14, and Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 141-42.

¹⁹² Irons, "Zion in Black and White," 216-20.

¹⁹³ For a helpful discussion of the American Baptist Missionary Convention, founded by black Baptists in New York City in 1840, as well as other black Baptist organizations in the North, see Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, 39-45. Washington notes that any person could join the convention by mailing in a fee of one dollar; at one meeting, twenty-eight Virginians sent in subscriptions. The convention supported African missions, but focused more on domestic concerns, such as establishing new churches, educating ministers, finding ministers for churches that lacked leadership, and providing for the widows of deceased ministers. Like white organizations, the AMBC advocated the support of Bible, Sunday school, and tract societies, as well as campaigning for temperance. Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, 39-40. The work of the AMBC and other northern black associations prefigured the establishment of black Baptist organizations in the postwar South, a topic studied in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

¹⁹⁴ First Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 15, 1835.

churches' temperance successes in 1841, noting that the "decrease of intemperance" of the black members at Hampton Baptist had "attracted the notice and commendation of the community."¹⁹⁵ A few years later, Dover commended Hampton Baptist's black congregants for their "neatness, good order and intelligence," pointing to the church's "Total Abstinence" policy as the cause. Yet Dover's praise of Hampton whites for "disseminating these principles among their colored people," and its recommendation that other churches follow suit, highlights the intersection of paternalism and evangelical reform. At least in this case, it appears that temperance measures had emanated from zealous white leaders who eagerly steered blacks into a central goal of antebellum "benevolence."¹⁹⁶

Dover's report, however, also mentioned that stringent temperance regulations had been adopted by the members of First African in Richmond.¹⁹⁷ In February 1844, the well-known evangelical slaveholder, reformer, and colonizationist John Hartwell Cocke of Fluvanna County gave a temperance address to the congregation.¹⁹⁸ A couple of months later, church leaders engaged in a "long and friendly discussion" over a proposal to make temperance a "term of fellowship"—that is, a requirement for church membership; they finally requested that Pastor Ryland "take the sense of the great body of the church" at the next communion gathering. Although the church minutes do not record the congregation's actual vote, it is clear from Dover's report that the rule won

¹⁹⁵ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1841*, 10.

¹⁹⁶ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1844*, 16.

¹⁹⁷ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1844*, 16.

¹⁹⁸ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Feb. 4, 1844. For more about the evangelical reforms of John Hartwell Cocke and his wife Louisa, particularly among their slaves at Bremo plantation, see M. Boyd Coyner, Jr., "John Hartwell Cocke of Bremo: Agriculture and Slavery in the Ante-bellum South" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1961); Louis B. Gimelli, "Louisa Maxwell Cocke: An Evangelical Plantation Mistress in the Antebellum South," *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (Spring 1989), 53-71; and Cornelius, *Slave Missions*, 69-72.

approval.¹⁹⁹ Cocke's reformist rhetoric, no doubt reinforcing other "benevolent" influences of the period, had apparently pleased the members enough to prompt them to spearhead a temperance movement themselves.

Around the same time, Gillfield and Petersburg African joined other churches in the Dover and Portsmouth Associations in forming their own temperance societies. Considering the significant influence of those churches' active black deaconries, temperance reforms likely originated among black leadership—or among black members more generally—as well as among whites.²⁰⁰ Certainly black churches' disciplinary records—which included many cases of members cited for intoxication, as was the case also in interracial bodies—demonstrate their serious concerns about alcohol use.

The members at First African assuredly held the reins of their temperance reformation. When a guest speaker, one "Judge Oneal of S.C.," gave a lecture on the topic in 1852, some of the members became offended by "sundry expressions" he used. The clerk—probably Ryland himself—recorded that their irritation was "painfully evident by the murmurs & by their leaving the house in large numbers!!"²⁰¹ One can only speculate about what offended them, but perhaps the speaker had employed condescending language in his exhortations. The congregants would not have taken issue with radical temperance reform itself, as they had previously passed a drastic temperance

¹⁹⁹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Apr. 7, 1844.

²⁰⁰ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1843*, 6.

²⁰¹ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Jun. 6, 1852. The speaker was almost certainly John Belton O'Neall of South Carolina, then President of the Court of Law Appeals and the Court of Errors and President of the Greenville and Columbia Railroad. He would later serve as Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court. Among other works, he had compiled *The Negro Law of South Carolina* in 1848. Also an active Baptist reformer, O'Neall was elected President of the Sons of Temperance of North America in Richmond around the time of his visit to First African. John Howard Brown, ed., *Lamb's Biographical Dictionary of the United States, Vol. VI* (Boston: Federal Book Company of Boston, 1903), 70; U.R. Brooks, *South Carolina Bench and Bar, Vol. I* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Company, 1908), 21-31; John Belton O'Neall, *The Negro Law of South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: J.G. Bowman, 1848).

requirement for fellowship. Despite the restrictions placed on them by civil legislators and Baptist leaders, these black members directed their own benevolent reforms and freely expressed their disapproval of some forms of white interference.

In addition to supporting missions and temperance, black Baptists organized campaigns and committees to assist impoverished brethren. In coordination with its Charitable Relief Society, First African established a Poor Saints Fund in 1848, led by a board of seventeen trustees from the congregation who appointed a chairman, clerk, and treasurer each year.²⁰² Other churches set up similar organizations, among them the mixed-race congregation of Mattaponi in 1849, which noted that the church's poor "appealed strongly to...christian charity."²⁰³ Likewise, the black leaders and members of Ebenezer Baptist, also known as Third African of Richmond, created a Poor Saints Fund soon after the church's establishment in 1858.²⁰⁴

The trustees of First African's fund took care in distributing aid, ruling that no one could receive assistance unless he or she was "nearly helpless from disease or old age."²⁰⁵ And when the trustees requested permission to offer aid to the "needy who [were] not members of the church and also to bury the dead who leave no means for that purpose," the congregation refused, declaring such practices outside the Society's constitutional duties. Immediately after adopting this resolution, however, the congregation appointed a committee to "ascertain & report the cost of granite steps for the front of the House"; as in white-led churches, building campaigns often dominated

²⁰² First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 4, 1848. In 1859, for example, the church raised \$223.90 for the poor. First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, front matter.

²⁰³ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1854, Jul. 8, 1849.

²⁰⁴ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, 1858-1876, Aug. 14, 1859, LVA.

²⁰⁵ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Dec. 4, 1848.

the attention and treasuries of black congregations in the 1850s.²⁰⁶ Still, the church did take opportunities to provide for its members. As mentioned earlier, Hannah Brown's bequest of property to the Charitable Relief Society helped bolster the Poor Saints Fund. And when the Danville Railroad Company offered wood to the "city poor" in 1854, church leaders asked Ryland to secure some for needy brethren. Ryland learned that some of the wood was available for the "colored poor" and informed the church where to get it.²⁰⁷

Gillfield's members also oversaw a variety of charitable fundraising campaigns during this period. In 1852, the church determined that the deacons should "have the power to draw on the Poor Saints fund an [sic] no other" without first consulting the congregation.²⁰⁸ Black leader Thomas McKenzie brought "Sister" Jones Mitchell's case before the church, which had "no objection" to individual members assisting her as they saw fit.²⁰⁹ After Abraham Robinson informed the church that "Bro." Samuel Pryer was "destitute of a home," the church appointed deacons to "make some provision for him."²¹⁰ Within a month, the deacons had found him a room, and the church agreed to pay the rent.²¹¹ Upon Matthew Lewis's death in 1861, the congregation voted to cover all of his funeral expenses, totaling \$12.²¹² Unlike First African, Gillfield's members sometimes allowed the deacons to provide for persons outside their own ranks. When

²⁰⁶ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 4, 1856. See Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 42-46, for a discussion of how southern churches pursued the "pleasures of respectability" by constructing impressive brick buildings in the late antebellum period, sometimes incurring significant debt to do so, quotation on 45.

²⁰⁷ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, Nov. 2, 1851, Dec. 31, 1852, Mar. 6, 1853, May 4, 1856, Feb. 5, 1854.

²⁰⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1853, May 16, 1852.

²⁰⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jun. 6, 1858.

²¹⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul 18, 1858.

²¹¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Aug. 1 and Oct. 19, 1858. For some reason, however, the church eventually stopped paying for Pryer's lodging in 1859, Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jan. 16, 1859.

²¹² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Nov. 3, 1861.

Rosanna Biggins complained to the congregation of “old age, infirm[ity] and poverty,” members voted that the deacons should “discharge their benevolence...untill [sic] further notice,” even though Biggins was not a member.²¹³

Occasionally, Gillfield organized collections to help free slaves from bondage. When a freed woman from a “sister church” was “contracted” by her former owners for debt—perhaps a form of binding out to work off the obligation—she sought Gillfield’s help to “purchis [sic] herself & children.” The church asked the pastor to set aside a Sunday on which the collection would be for her “bennifit.”²¹⁴ Berry Smith wrote a letter to the church asking for assistance in “buing [sic] his wife & child,” and a Sunday offering was dedicated to him.²¹⁵ Though not linked to a specific “reform” agenda or group, these collections further illustrate the value Gillfield’s leaders and members placed on uplifting individuals in their community and the systematic methods by which they pursued these goals.

The Gillfield congregation hosted an impressive network of organizations which were actively engaged in fundraising for building projects and other causes. In 1857, the church appointed a committee to poll the “different societies” within the congregation as to the amounts they were able to collect.²¹⁶ Church leaders later expressed gratitude for the “benevolence” of the “General Independent Melodious Songsters” in donating their concert proceeds, which went to pay the pastor’s salary.²¹⁷ Gillfield’s female members played an especially prominent role in raising money. The “Sisters of the Good

²¹³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Oct. 4, 1857.

²¹⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Aug. 19, 1860.

²¹⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Sept. 1, 1861.

²¹⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 12, 1857; for another example, see Sept. 5, 1858.

²¹⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Apr. 19, 1857.

Samaritan [sic] Society,” for instance, deposited \$442 with the church in September 1857.²¹⁸ The deacons eventually gave this group permission to hold regular meetings in the building on Sunday mornings.²¹⁹ Female groups apparently held firm control of their own proceeds. When called to present their gains to the church, one women’s organization insisted that their money was “gotten up to enlarge or rebuild” the church edifice and refused to surrender the funds until the building commenced. The church agreed to this requirement.²²⁰

The women of Gillfield also held fundraising “fairs” in the community. In 1859, the leadership requested that they conduct such an event to raise money “in any honest way not to bring any reproach upon the church.” These “Sisters of the Fair” acquired \$328 for the building fund and received the church’s “sincere thanks.”²²¹ Evincing the church’s continued reliance on and respect for these women, a “Female Building Society,” with member Charity Newsom serving as president, was eventually created.²²² Groups of young people organized at Gillfield as well. The “Young Men’s Youthfull [sic] Society” and the “Female Children Building Society” were active in the early 1860s.²²³

The story of Afro-Virginians’ involvement in colonization, missions, temperance, and charity work highlights the complexity both of black independence within the Baptist church and of interactions between black and white evangelicals in the antebellum years. While proslavery ideology and anti-black laws were firmly entrenched in Virginia society

²¹⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Sept. 6, 1857. For other activities of the “Sisters of the Good Samaritan Society,” see Aug. 22, Sept. 12, Nov. 21, and Dec. 19, 1858, Jan. 2, 1859.

²¹⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Nov. 7, 1858; see also Apr. 3, 1859.

²²⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Nov. 21 and Dec. 19, 1858, Jan. 2 and 16, 1859.

²²¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Apr. 3 and Jun. 19, 1859; see also Jan. 3, 1858, Aug. 5, 1860.

²²² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Nov. 20, 1859.

²²³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, Jul. 7, 1860 and Aug. 4, 1861.

during this period, room still existed for African Americans to make significant contributions to benevolent reform, on their own and in cooperation with white-led institutions. As Charles Irons puts it, “black and white evangelicals may not have always worked side by side, but at least they labored in tandem.”²²⁴ Yet this cooperation between Baptists of the two races entailed no wholesale surrender of authority by blacks to whites as both joined other evangelicals across the nation in establishing intricate, well-organized structures of leadership, communication, and fundraising.

The far-reaching movement of “benevolent” reform provides a useful gauge of the development and repercussions of antebellum American ideologies. Northern and southern evangelical ideals diverged in important ways, and divisions between black and white Christians grew during this period. Slavery loomed large in the minds of many reformers—with some wishing to abolish it and others to defend or “improve” it. The topic proved volatile enough to split the nation’s denominations a decade and a half before war erupted. Meanwhile, the question of white supervision of black religious activity created significant tension among southern evangelicals. For white and black Virginia Baptists, unpredictable interactions characterized the period as the enforcement of racial legislation waxed and waned, and as blacks strove to maintain autonomy and make their own contributions to the reforms of the day. Though both groups shared a desire to convert and discipline sinners, white Baptists seemed to hold religious education, including that of blacks, in highest regard, while antebellum black Virginians appear to have valued African missions and social uplift above other projects.

²²⁴ Irons, “Zion in Black and White,” 223.

Yet the goals and methods of many evangelicals still intersected across denominational, regional, and racial lines during the antebellum decades. Millennial fervor, Christian values, and new models of bureaucratic organization knit these groups together despite the ever-widening social and political gaps. The activities of these reformers often overlapped or at least ran in parallel courses. Though cognizant of the Civil War that ensued, scholars must remember that, to many people, real cooperation and progress among evangelicals still seemed possible during the period that we now call “antebellum.” The divisions within nineteenth-century reformism were by no means categorical, nor were they always predictable. The actions and motivations of various groups should be studied within the context of an evangelical reform movement that encompassed the entire nation. For groups like the Baptist Charitable Relief Society at First African Baptist Church in Richmond, the era was rich with opportunities for organization and fundraising and for seeking lasting social and spiritual change.

Chapter 4: “We Shall Proceed Separate and Alone of Them”: Black and White Tidewater Baptists Respond to War and Emancipation

When war came to Virginia, Jesse Dungee was busy farming his land as a free man near the village of Aylets, King William County, with his wife Mary and their children. Living a long day’s walk northeast of Richmond, the Dungees descended from African, European, and Native American inhabitants of the region. On Sundays, the Dungees gathered with fellow free black, enslaved, Indian, and white Baptists at the Colosse meeting house, where Jesse had served as a deacon since the early 1850s. During the years of Civil War and Reconstruction, much would change for the Dungee family and for the rest of the community. By 1870, the Dungees had moved across the county to West Point on the York River, probably because most of Aylets had been burned by Federal troops. In the meantime, enslaved men and women of King William experienced the jubilee of freedom, while white residents attempted to pick up the pieces of their past life. Now a licensed preacher, Jesse Dungee had left the church at Colosse and was organizing independent black churches; he established a school on land he himself had donated and ran successfully for a seat in the state legislature. All the while, he continued to cultivate his land, serve as a local shoemaker, and care for a houseful of people.¹

¹ The town of Aylett is spelled without an “s” today. U.S. Federal Census of 1860, King William County; U.S. Federal Census of 1870, King William County; Dorothy Francis Atkinson, *King William County in the Civil War: Along Mangohick Byways* (Lynchburg, VA: H.E. Howard, 1990), 87-88; Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, 1814-1870, Mar. 1850, Mar. 9, 1867, Sept. 11, 1869, VBHS; Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, rev. ed. 1996 [orig. pub. 1993]), 87. Jesse Dungee represented King William County in the Virginia House of Delegates in the 1871-1872 and 1872-1873 sessions. Cynthia Miller Leonard, *The General Assembly of Virginia, July 30, 1619-January 11, 1978: A Bicentennial Register of Members* (Richmond: Published for the General Assembly of Virginia by the Virginia State Library, 1978), 514. He also served as Justice of the Peace for King William County. Luther Porter Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia, 1865-1895* (Norfolk, VA: Guide Quality Press, 1946), 12-13. Like many other pro-Union southerners, Dungee appealed to the U.S. Southern Claims Commission in 1873 for wartime property damage. U.S. Southern Claims Commission Master Index, 1871-1880

Emancipation drastically affected church life in the South, not only for the Dungee family, but for all southerners. Black Christians left interracial congregations and associations by the tens of thousands within the space of a few years, in what historian Katharine Dvorak identifies in Biblical terms as an “exodus.”² What is less clear, however, is how the separation of black and white Christians transpired on a local level, why some black people chose to leave and others to stay in fellowship with whites, and what role white church members and leaders played in the process. Writing in the early twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois decried the “complete expulsion” of blacks from white churches and an “absolute withdrawal of church fellowship” by white Baptists in particular. Historian Carter G. Woodson noted that southern white Baptists “gladly got rid of” black members “when they could no longer dictate their spiritual development as the master did that of the slave,” but Woodson also acknowledged that racial divisions had begun to emerge long before the war.³

Since these early histories of the postwar turmoil were published, however, scholars have largely overturned DuBois’s categorical analysis by exploring the nuances of the southern denominations’ racial schisms. While both whites and blacks exhibited a variety of responses to emancipation, scholars agree that blacks’ departure from the

[Ancestry.com online database], (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2007), original data found in Gary B. Mills, *Southern Loyalists in the Civil War: The Southern Claims Commission* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2004).

² Katharine L. Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1991).

³ W. E. Burghardt DuBois, “Religion in the South,” in Booker T. Washington and W. E. Burghardt DuBois, *The Negro in the South: His Economic Progress in Relation to His Moral and Religious Development* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1907), 125-91, quotation on 173; Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921), 196-202, quotation on 201.

existing churches was largely voluntary.⁴ Generally speaking, whites wanted to maintain control over black congregants, often regulating black participation even more than they had done before the war; expulsion of black church members would have subverted that goal. Disappointed at the war's outcome, southern whites attempted to use the church as a conservative force to preserve as much of the antebellum social structure as had not been irrevocably destroyed. Black Christians seem to have enjoyed more freedoms in interracial fellowships before the war, as slavery proved adequate to institutionalize white dominance.

Blacks most often chose to shake off prewar restraints, however, wishing to organize their own bodies independent of white leadership. Recognizing that they could either battle against equality-minded blacks or let them go, whites generally chose the

⁴ Altrutheus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (Washington, D.C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1926), 183-84; W. Harrison Daniel, "Virginia Baptists and the Negro, 1865-1902," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 76 (Jul. 1968), 340-63; John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972), 31-32; H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...: Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 226-29; Kenneth K. Bailey, "The Post-Civil War Racial Separations in Southern Protestantism: Another Look," *Church History* 46 (Dec. 1977), 453-73; Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 198-225; Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 175; David O. Moore, "The Withdrawal of Blacks from Southern Baptist Churches Following Emancipation," *Baptist History and Heritage* 16 (1981), 12-18; John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 201-02; Katharine L. Dvorak, "After Apocalypse, Moses," in *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870*, ed. John B. Boles, 173-91 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 108-11; Donald G. Nieman, ed., *Church and Community Among Black Southerners, 1865-1900*, Vol. 9 of Donald G. Nieman, ed., *African American Life in the Post-Emancipation South, 1861-1900: A Twelve Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994); Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 46-74, 257-58; Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 69-75; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 191-209; Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 93-112; Charles F. Irons, "Two Great Divisions of the Same Army: Ecclesiastical Separation by Race and the Millennium," in *Apocalypse and the Millennium in the American Civil War Era*, Ben Wright and Zach Dresser, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, Forthcoming).

latter without much protest. They formalized the separation by freely granting letters of dismissal, keeping blacks in “good standing” in the Baptist faith. In some cases, whites even assisted blacks in setting up congregational governing bodies and obtaining property for churches. In one of the many paradoxes of southern evangelicalism, whites both encouraged and lamented racial separation, aiding those blacks who wished to leave even as they circumscribed the rights of those who chose to stay. Upon leaving, black churchgoers greatly expanded the opportunities for leadership and semi-autonomous assembly that they had carved out for themselves in the years before the war.

Located at the war’s epicenter, the churches of Tidewater Virginia faced considerable setbacks in the 1860s. Meeting schedules suffered frequent interruptions, church records went missing or ceased altogether to be kept, members left to join the fighting, financial troubles abounded, and in some cases, the buildings themselves were damaged or destroyed by Federal forces. Such was the case for Suffolk Baptist, whose meeting house was practically gutted when it became a Federal hospital.⁵ In Norfolk, North West Baptist stopped meeting for several months in 1864 while Union soldiers occupied the church.⁶

Four Mile Creek church, near Richmond, suffered a worse fate; its only record of the wartime period was a clerk’s note that “no regular services were held, the members were scattered, the neighborhood made desolate, the church house and nearly every other house for miles around were destroyed by the enemy.”⁷ Considering that the “entire

⁵ Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1855-1907, note after Jul. 28, 1861, VBHS.

⁶ North West Baptist Church Minute Book, 1841-1869, Feb.-Aug. 1864, VBHS.

⁷ Four Mile Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1848-1884, note after Mar. 1861, VBHS; see also Fairfields Baptist Church Minute Book, 1844-1906, note after Mar. 1861, VBHS; Beulah (Hermon) Baptist

house of worship was destroyed, and the entire community impoverished by the Federal army,” which had encamped in the region for months, the Dover Association and the statewide General Association specially appointed the Reverend Robert Ryland to oversee the struggling congregation in 1866. Ryland later remembered that many of the congregation’s members had been killed during the war, and that “every fence, every tree, every residence near the old church” was demolished.⁸

While most churches did not experience that degree of trauma, they did report other kinds of challenges, particularly relating to black members. The Union army’s occupation of much of Hampton Roads throughout the war enabled thousands of slaves to seek their freedom behind Federal lines, particularly in Hampton and Norfolk.⁹ Churches all over the region reported losses of membership, and they disciplined those who fled, generally in absentia. After holding a meeting to update its roster in 1862, Bruington Baptist of King and Queen County excluded seven men for “abandoning their homes and owners and going off with the Federal Army”; Virginia’s Middle Peninsula experienced a series of Union raids during the war which no doubt encouraged runaways. The congregation also expelled a man named Coleman for an unsuccessful escape attempt. The very next month, however, the church baptized more slaves into fellowship. Over the next couple of years, Bruington expelled twenty-one more black men and

Church Minute Book, 1852-1886, Aug. 1861, VBHS; Walnut Grove Baptist Church Minute Book, 1859-1900, note after Aug. 1861, VBHS; Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, May 1862, VBHS; Coan (formerly Wicomico) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1847-1931, Jan. 31 and Apr., 1863, VBHS.

⁸ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia: Held in the City of Richmond, June 7th, 8th, 9th, and 11th, 1866* (Richmond: Dispatch Steam Press, 1866), 34; Robert Ryland to Carthen Archer, Jul. 26, 1881, underlining original, Miscellaneous Letters, 1826-1898, Robert Ryland Papers, VBHS. For more on Virginia Baptists’ experiences during the Civil War, see W. Harrison Daniel, *Virginia Baptists, 1860-1902* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Baptist Historical Society, 1987), 1-22.

⁹ For more on the wartime escapes, see Robert F. Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation: Black Hampton, VA, 1861-1890* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 17-31; Cassandra L. Newby-Alexander, *An African American History of the Civil War in Hampton Roads* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2010), 39-48.

twelve women for “going off to the public enemy” while continuing to baptize other enslaved people.¹⁰

Typical of Baptist practice, the churches did not establish any uniform policy regarding wartime runaways. Colosse—Jesse Dungee’s church in war-torn King William County—agreed in November of 1862 to retain those who had “gone with the enemy” as members for twelve months, after which the church simply “dismissed” them.¹¹ In contrast to Colosse’s rather lax response to runaway members, Tucker’s Swamp of Southampton County voted to expel all black members, both slave and free, who left for Yankee lines.¹² Slaves in Southampton and the neighboring counties generally fled across the Blackwater River, Southampton County’s eastern border, to Union-occupied territories, such as the Federal garrison at Suffolk.¹³

Recordkeeping proved challenging amid the war’s chaos. A number of churches appointed special committees to find out which enslaved members had left their masters for the Union army. In the fall of 1864, Coan Baptist Church, on Virginia’s Northern Neck, added twenty-three new black members to the roster while also striking the names of sixty-nine escaped slaves. While the Northern Neck was generally undisturbed during the war, a small raiding party of New Hampshire volunteers did cross the Potomac River into the region early in 1864. It is likely that at least some of the black fugitives on

¹⁰ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1831-1868, Oct. 4 and 19, Nov., 1862, Jul. 19, 1863, Jul. 2, 1864; Alfred Bagby, *King and Queen County, Virginia* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1908), 129-37. For other examples, see Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1875, Aug. 9, 1862, in W.T. Hundley, *History of Mattaponi Baptist Church: King and Queen County Virginia* (Richmond, VA: Appeals Press, 1928); Antioch (Raccoon Swamp) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1837-1892, May and Aug., 1863, VBHS; Berea Baptist Church Minute Book, 1853-1881, Jun. and Jul. 1864, VBHS; Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, 1825-1865, Sept. 11, 1864, VBHS.

¹¹ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1862, Nov. 1863; Atkinson, *King William County in the Civil War*.

¹² Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1858-1906, Sept. 13, 1862; Jul. 11, 1863, VBHS.

¹³ Brian Steel Wills, *The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 47-97, 192-93, 210, 237.

Coan's roster fled with these troops.¹⁴ Farther south, on the Middle Peninsula, which was raided by Union cavalry in 1864, Upper King and Queen Church excluded forty-one people for running away to the Federals in the fall of that year.¹⁵ Several months after the war's end, Moore's Swamp, located in Surry County just south of the James River, excluded nearly its entire black male and female membership—almost fifty people—for running away.¹⁶ While not located directly in Union-occupied territory, these regions were close enough to the Federal army's lines to facilitate escapes.

In light of these upheavals, some white church leaders began to wonder how, or even whether, they should continue supervising black members. At Glebe Landing on the Middle Peninsula, for instance, the white male members gathered in 1862 to discuss whether to cease regular meetings for slaves, but the majority voted to continue the practice.¹⁷ That same year, in a neighboring county, Mattaponi Church set up an evening Sunday school for blacks, yet in 1864, the church voted to postpone indefinitely its discipline meetings for the black members "on account of the present state of things among the colored people."¹⁸ Tucker's Swamp, which held only a small number of meetings for the "benefit of the coloured brethren" during the war, blamed "circumstances beyond [their] control" for the lapses.¹⁹ Yet at Upper King and Queen,

¹⁴ Coan (formerly Wicomoco) Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1864; Laura E. Lawfer, "Northern Neck During the Civil War," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, ed. Brendan Wolfe, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Jun. 13, 2012, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Northern_Neck_During_the_Civil_War (accessed Nov. 6, 2012).

¹⁵ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, 1855-1897, Sept. 17, 1864, VBHS; Bagby, *King and Queen County, Virginia*, 133-37.

¹⁶ Coan (formerly Wicomoco) Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 3, 1863, Oct. 1864; Moore's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, 1855-1899, Sept. 16, 1865, also see membership rosters in front of book, VBHS. For other attempts to update church rosters during the war, see Mount Olivet Baptist Church Minute Book, 1847-1870, Aug., 15, 1863, VBHS, and Providence Baptist Church Minute Book, 1856-1886, Apr. 1864, VBHS.

¹⁷ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 16, 1862.

¹⁸ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 12 and Aug. 9, 1862, Jun. 11, 1864.

¹⁹ Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 8, 1863.

church business stayed more consistent, with black candidates receiving baptism and black members donating money to the African mission fund.²⁰ In the midst of heightened racial tension, including the “provocation” of black congregants leaving their communities in such drastic numbers, it is significant that more than a few white Baptists still accepted, ministered to, and even pursued black members.

Other churches continued to appoint black men to positions of leadership. In November 1862, enslaved member Amstead took the office of deacon at Colosse.²¹ Directly to the south in New Kent County, Emmaus appointed free black “brother” Harvey Patterson to “wait on” the other free black members to see how much they could contribute toward the salary arrears owed to the pastor.²² Other deacons who had been appointed before the war, like Jesse Dungee, most likely maintained their posts within their congregations—church minutes do not indicate otherwise.

Black members had sometimes pushed for independent worship services in the antebellum period, and such initiatives only intensified amid the wartime upheaval. Just as significant as the desire of some local white Baptists to continuing shepherding black members during the war years is the fact that some blacks dared to press for more autonomy at such an unpredictable time. The war’s influence, including the presence of Union raiders and Federal garrisons throughout and directly outside the region, afforded blacks new opportunities and may have emboldened black churchgoers.

²⁰ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, May 18 and Jun. 15, 1861, Aug. 16, 1862, May 16, 1863.

²¹ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 1862.

²² Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, 1856-1871, Jan. 1863, VBHS.

Blacks in the Shoulder's Hill congregation of Nansemond County had been gathering separately since at least the 1830s.²³ During the war, white leaders of this church stayed connected with the black members by continuing to appoint committees to attend their meetings.²⁴ Confederate soldiers converted the meeting house "belonging to the colored members" into a hospital early in the war. Blacks ceased meeting there until the Confederates withdrew in 1862; most of Nansemond County effectively became a "no-man's-land" between Federal-occupied territories to the east and Confederate defenses across the Blackwater River to the west.²⁵ After the Confederates abandoned the blacks' meeting house, and the black members resumed their meetings, the white members attempted to resume supervision of them. Chafing under such oversight, however, the black leaders at Sycamore Hill—a branch of Shoulder's Hill—finally rebuffed the efforts of the white committee in September of 1863. In their report, the white committee members cited the "laws of the State" as one of their reasons for wanting to attend the black members' meetings, but also asserted that they had sought fellowship "as Christians and as brethren in Christ," having the "spiritual welfare" of the church in mind.²⁶

When the black leaders stated that they did not know when they would be prepared to receive the white committee again, the committee apparently spent three hours "using all the means and all the talent it possessed to reason with [the black leaders] and persuade them." Finally, the whites warned the black congregants that they could lose the "protection" of the white church if they did not comply. Believing the

²³ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, May 16, 1835, Jul. 1836, Jun. and Jul. 1844, VBHS; for more on antebellum racial divisions at Shoulder's Hill, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp. 103-04.

²⁴ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1869, Jul. 1861, Sept. 1862, Aug. 1863.

²⁵ Wills, *The War Hits Home*, 175-208.

²⁶ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1783-1907, Sept. 1863.

black members had treated them with “contempt,” the white committee recommended that the white members respond with “forbearance & charity,” even citing the adage “to Err is human to Forgive is divine.”²⁷ Here again, in spite of—or perhaps *because* of—the wartime atmosphere, the black membership at Sycamore Hill appeared remarkably assertive and the white committee surprisingly reticent.

Racial tensions continued to escalate in the community. On a November night a couple of months later, the whites’ meeting house at Sycamore Hill went up in flames. The clerk noted that it was “universally believed to be the work of an incendiary,” a black man, presumably free, who had been convicted of several thefts and who had been “ordered to leave the neighborhood”—a puzzlingly lax response on the part of local whites to an alleged criminal.²⁸ Perhaps the arsonist was protesting the attempts of Sycamore Hill whites at controlling the black fellowship, or perhaps the fire had nothing to do with the church conflict. Either way, both the crime and the fact that the white members readily believed it was the work of a black man indicate that interracial bonds of Baptist fellowship faced significant strain in the war years. By the war’s end, blacks at Sycamore Hill had severed their connection with the white body and organized themselves into a separate church “without first asking for and obtaining letters of dismissal,” a split that occurred considerably earlier than when most of the other churches in the region separated. In response, the white members formally withdrew their fellowship from all those who had left.²⁹

²⁷ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1783-1907, Sept. 1863.

²⁸ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1783-1907, Dec. 1863, Oct. 1866.

²⁹ Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1783-1907, Apr. 1865; see also Shoulder’s Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1869 (different minute book but with similar content), Sept. 1865, VBHS.

The city of Hampton, which remained under the control of Federals based at Fort Monroe from the outbreak of the war, offered significant opportunities for local blacks, as well as for runaways across the region who sought refuge in Union territory. It was here that General Benjamin Butler declared all fugitive slaves to be “contraband of war” in May 1861 and refused to return them to their masters, prompting hundreds of Tidewater slaves to flee to the fort in order to gain freedom.³⁰ By 1863, two black churches emerged in Hampton—First Baptist and Zion, led respectively by noted black orators William Taylor and William Thornton. First Baptist actually came out of a mixed-race body that had included an overwhelming black majority throughout the antebellum years. Whites in this congregation remained united with the Dover Association as the Hampton Baptist Church, although most members scattered after the evacuating Confederates set fire to the town in August 1861. With their church building destroyed, white Baptists did not resume regular meetings in Hampton until after the war. Hampton’s two black churches, however, chose to join the Norfolk, Virginia, Union Association, which was established in 1864 for black congregations in areas of Union occupation.³¹

³⁰ Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*; Newby-Alexander, *African American History of the Civil War in Hampton Roads*, 27-33.

³¹ Blanche Sydnor White and Emily Lewelling Hogg, *The History of Hampton Baptist Church, 1791-1966* [Hampton, VA: Hampton Baptist Church, 1966], 26-30; Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 13, 16, 76-77; *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866, Condensed*, 32 [Sept. 11, 1866 meeting]; *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association, Held in the Meeting-house of the First Baptist Church, Catharine St., Norfolk, Va., Oct. 16th, 17th, 19th, and 20th, 1868*, p. 11, in *African-American Baptist Annual Reports, 1865-1990*, Virginia, (Rochester, NY: American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Historical Library, 1997), (hereafter *AABAR*), microfilm reel 98 (the minutes of this organization before 1868 were not found, but the 1868 records show Hampton’s First Baptist and Zion Churches as members, along with 36 other churches by that point). For a discussion of black Baptist associations, see pp. 323-46 of this chapter, below. For statistics of the antebellum interracial Hampton Church, see Dover Baptist Association minutes between 1841 and 1860; by 1860, the church had contained 185 white members and 949 black members. *Minutes of the ...Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 23-28, VBHS.

White and black Baptists increasingly formed separate meetings as war engulfed Virginia, sometimes creating conflicts over space in church buildings. Richmond's Fourth African—an offshoot of the white Leigh Street Baptist—met for worship and business in the basement of its parent church. Shortly before the war began, the white church had complained that the blacks' business meetings were disturbing their own communion services. The black church had agreed to change the schedule of its meetings and refrain from singing during them.³² Leigh Street's wartime records indicate that whites were still attending the meetings of the black church to preserve order and offer aid.³³ At the end of the war, however, the white church saw fit to require that the black congregation "procure some other place as soon as convenient" to enable the whites to set up a school in the basement.³⁴ Ties of fellowship between whites and blacks clearly were fraying.

Fourth African's troubles with Leigh Street seem mild when compared with what went on at Court Street Baptist in Portsmouth. Unlike Richmond, which remained in Confederate hands until the end of the war, Portsmouth was evacuated by the Confederates along with Norfolk in May 1862.³⁵ A year earlier, white leaders at Court Street had opened an investigation into the character of their pastor, M.R. Walkinson, who, after moving to the North, celebrated his ability to finally "think and say what he please[d]." Walkinson, now deemed the church's "bitter enemy," seemed to "rejoice at the thought that the Confederated States [sic]" would be "invaded and partially exterminated." His statements shocked the church, since he had always expressed

³² Leigh Street Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1873, Mar. 25, 1861; see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp. 221-22.

³³ Leigh Street Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 27, 1863.

³⁴ Leigh Street Baptist Church Minute Book, May 29, 1865.

³⁵ Wills, *The War Hits Home*, 47-49.

forceful proslavery sentiments, a “violent hatred of Northern opinion on that subject,” and wholeheartedly supported secession. The congregation responded by expelling Walkinson and searching for a new pastor. Despite the fact that he had already moved North by this point, Walkinson’s expulsion was more than a token gesture; it indicated that the Portsmouth church no longer viewed him as a Christian believer in “good standing.”³⁶

Yet even Walkinson’s dramatic reversal did not prove as troubling to the congregation as the interracial conflicts that occurred throughout the war. Black members of Court Street had been gathering semi-autonomously in the church basement since the 1850s, and in 1859, the white members had agreed to build them a separate meeting house, for which a committee of several white men and women had accepted donations from the community.³⁷ Construction was delayed for a number of years, however, mostly because of the war. In the interim, the black congregation attempted to wrest more control of their fellowship from the whites, arousing significant opposition. When the black members wished to alter their meeting schedule in March 1862, for instance, the whites refused to allow the change.³⁸ The following year, the black deacons asked for complete control of the basement, and the white leaders unanimously denied that request as well.³⁹

At this point, the black deacons took more drastic action, perhaps spurred on by the fact that the Union army now had control of the city. On July 1, 1863, Edward

³⁶ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1875, May 10, 1861. The church minutes note that this Walkinson’s expulsion was later rescinded—see Oct. 5, 1862, Jul. 12, Sept. 13 and 20, 1863, and Jul. 8, 1871 for more on his case.

³⁷ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 11, 1857, Dec. 11, 1858, Mar. 11, Jun, 10, Sept. 9, Oct. 7, and Nov. 11, 1859; see Chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp. 223-24.

³⁸ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 11, 1862.

³⁹ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, May 10, 1863.

Corprew, John W. Gordon, and William Elliot composed a letter to the white leadership of Court Street listing four requests. First, they again asked for exclusive use of the basement in order to hold “quiet and peaceable” meetings for worship, business, Sunday and day schools. Second, they requested the “privilege” of choosing their own pastor and officers. They next asked the white leaders to return the money that the black members had raised for the unfinished meeting house. And finally, they noted that they wanted the white leaders to deliver their answers in writing to Elliot’s house by nine o’clock the next morning—a virtual ultimatum that would have been unthinkable before the Union occupation.⁴⁰

When a response did not arrive in time, Corprew, Gordon, and Elliot immediately issued another letter to Major General John Dix, commander of the Union army’s Seventh Corps, which was stationed in Hampton Roads. Petitioning Dix for aid in dealing with the white leaders, they noted that they had “tried to be faithful and prompt” in maintaining the current church building and had contributed about \$500 toward church expenses, such as the pastor’s salary, and to “benevolent enterprises” before the war. They also mentioned the sum they had already raised for the separate church building, which they had placed in the care of white trustees. The letter went on to discuss how the white members had recently begun to restrict the black members’ use of spaces in the church. Writing at three o’clock on the day they had asked their white brethren to

⁴⁰ Edward Corprew, John W. Gordon, and William Elliot to the Pastor, Deacons, clerk and Trustees of the Court St. Baptist Church, July 1, 1863, transcribed in Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, July 5, 1863.

respond, they noted that they had yet to receive any answer from the white leaders, who had also refused previous oral requests.⁴¹

Assuring Dix of their loyalty to the United States government, the black leaders asked him to intervene on their behalf. Apparently Dix took their case to heart; J.A. Bolles, a Provost Judge of the local military court, summoned James Borum, the white clerk of Court Street, to appear at the Court House in Norfolk a few days later to say why the “requests of the petitioners should not be granted.”⁴² Borum responded by composing his own letter to Judge Bolles, in which he tried to refute each of the black deacons’ complaints. The black members, he claimed, still had use of the basement before and after morning services, but the two congregations could not worship in the church at the same time since “one would disturb the other” and whites would be “forced out of the church altogether.” The church had already set up special times of worship and communion for the black members on Sunday afternoons a few years earlier. Borum also alleged that, when the church had to pay \$2000 to renovate the basement, the black members “paid not one dollar.” The white leaders, he continued, had refused to allow the black members to operate a day school in the basement because the pews would be “cut and mutilated as they are in all day schools.”⁴³

Borum went on to assert that the black members had always had the “privilege” of selecting their own leaders, aside from the pastor, who served both the black and white portions of the congregation. In order to choose their own pastor, they would have to

⁴¹ Edward Corprew, John W. Gordon, and William Elliot to Major General John A. Dix, Commander 7th Army Corps U.S.A., July 2, 1863, transcribed in Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, July 5, 1863.

⁴² W. Graham Tyler to James T. Borum, transcribed in Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, July 5, 1863.

⁴³ James T. Borum to J.A. Bolles, July 5, 1863, transcribed in Court Street Baptist (Portsmouth) Church Minute Book, July 5, 1863.

withdraw from the church and form an independent body. Furthermore, he alleged that the black members had not contributed nearly their share of the pastor's salary, nor had they offered \$500 for church expenses, as they had claimed. Regarding the new meeting house, Borum admitted that the war had delayed construction, adding that the white leaders would happily return the money which the black members had donated for that cause, "should they withdraw their connection from the Church." Finally, the letter insisted that the black deacons' request for an immediate response was unreasonable. Given no time to consult one another, the white leaders could not even consider agreeing to these demands before their regularly scheduled meeting. The black deacons, he wrote, had no authority to make these requests in such a fashion anyway.⁴⁴ The military administration refused to interfere any further. Informing Court Street that the case "must be arranged among yourselves," the Provost Court stated that neither the commanding general nor the judge could "undertake to reconcile church controversies."⁴⁵

Court Street's conflict offers yet another example of the push-and-pull dynamic that characterized southern interracial evangelicalism. The black deacons had a long history of exercising authority; this, along with their obvious resourcefulness, equipped them to put together a well-crafted claim to independent, unhindered worship. By appealing to the Union army and emphasizing their loyalty to the federal government,

⁴⁴ James T. Borum to J.A. Bolles, July 5, 1863, transcribed in Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, July 5, 1863.

⁴⁵ D. Wellard Smith to Committee of the Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church, July 15, 1863, transcribed in Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 13, 1863. In February 1864, however, the Provost Marshal's office did formally seize control of all places of worship in Portsmouth and Norfolk, issuing a proclamation that white and black Federal soldiers should have open access to local churches without "insult or indignity" from disgruntled civilians. The military government reserved the right to depose disrespectful church leaders and replace them with ones loyal to the Union cause. *The New Regime*, Mar. 17, 1864, cited in *A Documented History of the First Baptist Church Bute Street, Norfolk, Virginia 1800-1988*, ed. History and Archives Committee, Margaret L. Gordon, chairman (Virginia Beach: Hill's Printing Co., Inc., 1988), 7.

they attempted to outflank those who had long sought to superintend their religious activity. The white leaders defended themselves before the occupying army, declaring their black fellow members' complaints unfounded and their demands unreasonable. Given the apparent bitterness of this conflict over a long period, it is remarkable that blacks and whites continued to conduct business with one another at this church during the war years.

In 1864, a group of black members at Court Street expressed a desire to form a separate body, and a "council" of five white men was appointed by the white members to help the blacks accomplish this. White leaders then provided letters of dismissal to five black men—including deacon John Gordon, who had remained a member in good standing despite his involvement in the previous year's controversy. Other black members stayed at Court Street, however. At a meeting in March 1864, the remaining black deacons stated to the white leadership that they perceived "considerable religious feeling" in the church (presumably the black portion of the congregation), indicating the "prospect for a revival." They requested permission to hold night meetings on Sundays and Thursdays to accommodate these worshippers. The whites agreed, provided that the black members paid their own gas bills.⁴⁶

While black deacon John Gordon had already left the church, Brethren Elliot and Corprew remained for a few more years. Early in 1865, they petitioned the church to give them possession of a vacant lot, which previously had been donated to the church by a white member, so they could finally construct a separate building. The church granted them use of the land and agreed to turn over the deed as soon as the black members

⁴⁶ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 7, Mar. 13 and Apr. 10, 1864. In May 1864, Court Street's pastor was taken prisoner by Union General Butler (presumably Benjamin Butler), and the church began to serve as a Union hospital, May 9, 1864.

formed a “separate society.” The black deacons requested continued use of the basement while they waited for the new building to be completed, to which the white leaders agreed. The whites also authorized the clerk to write letters of dismissal for any black member who wanted to leave.⁴⁷

When the newly established Zion Baptist Church requested assistance in ordaining Corprew, Court Street appointed a committee to do so.⁴⁸ Corprew, a schoolteacher and missionary with the American Baptist Home Mission Society, would soon serve as pastor of Zion Baptist, and later as an officer in the district and statewide black Baptist associations. Over the next year, Zion’s members continued to meet in the basement at Court Street, paying for their own gas and offering to repaint the pulpit and repair the floors once they moved into their own building.⁴⁹ The interactions between blacks and whites at Court Street during the postwar period reveal how these people ironically worked harmoniously to achieve a separation.⁵⁰

As black people’s demands for influence and autonomy within interracial congregations like Court Street increased during the war years, black leadership at existing African American churches likewise expanded in scope. As with mixed-race bodies that faced disruptions because of wartime events, the records of local black churches are thin. What is clear, however, is that black leaders maintained de facto control of their churches, much as they had before the war. Additionally, once the Union

⁴⁷ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 10, 1865.

⁴⁸ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, May, 1865.

⁴⁹ Court Street (Portsmouth) Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 8, 1865, Jul. 7, Sept. 7, 1866, Jan. 11, 1867.

⁵⁰ For more on Corprew, see C.F. Irons, “E.G. Corprew (ca. 1830-1881),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, ed. Brendan Wolfe, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Apr. 5, 2011, http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Corprew_E_G_ca_1830-1881 (accessed Feb. 1, 2012). Church minutes abbreviate Corprew’s first name as “Edwd,” but Irons presents it as “Edenborough.”

army arrived, they often worked directly with northern missionaries and teachers, such as those from the American Baptist Home Missionary Society, to organize Sabbath schools along with day schools, until the Freedmen's Bureau began to establish a more centralized, nonsectarian education system in the region.⁵¹

Yet despite their cooperation with northern Christians and reformers, historian John O'Brien asserts, black church leaders, who were "accustomed to managing their own affairs under a legally strict but customarily lax white supervision," courted "their allies and made changes on their own terms."⁵² Some churches elected northern ministers as their pastors, while others chose to place local blacks in the pulpit. While churches in Union-occupied areas such as Norfolk generally engaged black ministers earlier than those in Confederate strongholds, such as Richmond, all of the well-established black churches across the region were preparing to operate independently of southern whites by the end of the war.

After the city of Norfolk fell to Union forces in May 1862, Norfolk's black churches joined northern missionaries to address the spiritual, physical, and educational needs of black refugees, many of whom poured in from the countryside; they also took part in events celebrating the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.⁵³ First Baptist Church on Bute Street elected its own pastor, Lewis Tucker, the clerk and preacher who had taken a prominent role in the church after its exclusion from the Portsmouth Association in the 1840s. Ordained in 1863 at a ceremony that included the church's

⁵¹ John Thomas O'Brien, Jr., *From Bondage to Citizenship: The Richmond Black Community, 1865-1867* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 140-41, 222-25, 270, 384-85.

⁵² O'Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 94-95.

⁵³ Newby-Alexander, *African American History of the Civil War in Hampton Roads*, 39-48; Wills, *The War Hits Home*, 47-49; *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 7-8; Robert G. Murray et al., eds., *The Historic First Baptist Church, Celebrating Two Hundred Years of Christ-Centered Ministries to the Community, 1800-2000* (Acton, MA: Tapestry Press, 2000), 33-34.

former white pastor, Vincent Palen, and black pastor William Thornton of Hampton, along with a U.S. army chaplain, Tucker was the first black person in Norfolk to receive the honor of an ordination. Perhaps Palen's involvement in the ceremony indicates the persistence of a certain degree of Christian brotherhood between the white pastor and his former black congregation. Moreover, his presence was probably necessary; ordinations could only be performed by those who had been ordained themselves, and few blacks in the region were authorized clergymen at this point. Tucker went on to extend the apostolic chain himself, participating in a number of ordinations of black ministers during the next couple of decades.⁵⁴ In addition to his duties as pastor, Tucker led the church in charitable ministries to refugees and Federal soldiers. In 1864, for instance, he gave lectures before the Soldier's Union Aid Society and the Soldiers' Relief Association. Tucker also baptized 178 people in Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Kempsville during the war years.⁵⁵

Williamsburg African served as a Confederate hospital early in the war until Federal forces took over the town during the Peninsula Campaign in the spring of 1862. Church services eventually resumed under Union occupation, and northern missionaries established a day school for local blacks in the church building early in 1863. Later that year, the members agreed to change the church's name to First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, not only staking their claim as the oldest Baptist church in the community, but also removing the racial label long attached to their congregation. The church soon separated from the white-led Dover Baptist Association and joined other area black

⁵⁴ Lewis Tucker Family and Church Record Book, 1849-1890, Carter G. Woodson Collection of Negro Papers and Related Documents, 1803-1936, Part I, microfilm reel 8, LVA.

⁵⁵ Tucker Family and Church Record Book, "Memoranda" and "Number of Persons Baptized by Rev. Lewis Tucker."

churches in Hampton and Norfolk to form the Norfolk, Virginia, Union Baptist Association.⁵⁶

In Charles City County—located east of Richmond in a region that was contested throughout the war—Elam Baptist declared its independence from white oversight by selecting its own pastor at the war’s end. A church history relates that the congregation no longer needed the services of white pastor J.H. Christian, who had filled the office in compliance with state law. The church’s “real work,” however, had always been “performed by the colored preacher and exhorters” from within the congregation. After Christian stepped down, the congregation chose Samuel Brown, son of the church’s founder, Abraham Brown, as its new pastor. He served the church until his death in 1881, and his own son succeeded him.⁵⁷

Churches in Petersburg, which remained under Confederate control almost until the end of the war, faced considerable disruptions brought on by the conflict. According to a church history, many of Gillfield’s members “scattered” during the war—either to flee the region, go into hiding, or work on the city’s fortifications. Confederate soldiers eventually took possession of the church building, leaving the structure, in the words of the church history, “worse for its rough use.” Despite such interruptions to regular meetings, however, Gillfield’s leadership kept the church intact. Some of the black deacons who had served in the antebellum period continued in leadership into the postwar period. White pastor William Robinson “held on as best he could,” probably

⁵⁶ Tommy L. Bogger, *Since 1776: The History of First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Virginia* (Williamsburg, VA: First Baptist Church, [2006]), 27-28; Carol Kettenburg Dubbs, *Defend This Old Town: Williamsburg During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 46, 52; *Minutes of the ... Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association... 1868* (as stated above, the Norfolk Union Association’s minutes before 1868 were not found, but according to Bogger, Williamsburg was one of the association’s founding churches).

⁵⁷ *History of Elam Baptist Church, Charles City Co., Va., Published on its One Hundredth Anniversary* (Richmond, VA: Reformer Electric Print, 1910), 26-27.

retaining his post in part because of the continued Confederate presence in Petersburg, although church historian Richard Kennard affectionately noted that Robinson “seemed to do all that was in his power for us.” At the end of the war, however, he stepped aside to allow the congregation to select one of its “own people” for the position.⁵⁸

After hearing a black guest missionary named Henry Williams preach during a service in 1865, Gillfield’s congregation called him to fill the role of pastor. Although a Virginia native, Williams had moved to Ohio at an early age and even spent a brief period in Africa before returning to Virginia.⁵⁹ The Reverend Daniel Jackson, who had served as a Baptist preacher and ordained elder for many years before the war, still presided over the First Baptist Church of Petersburg, and apparently had baptized around five thousand people by the 1860s. John Jasper, renowned as a dynamic preacher all over the region by this point, was helping to lead the congregation at Third Baptist, and was recommended for ordination by the newly organized Colored Shiloh Baptist Association in 1865.⁶⁰

The First African Church in Richmond, its members now more than three thousand in number, moved away from white leadership—permissive though it had

⁵⁸ Richard Kennard, *A Short History of the Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg Virginia*, compiled by William H. Johnson (Petersburg: Frank A. Owen, 1903), 19. Thomas McKenzie, for instance, served as a deacon at Gillfield before and after the Civil War. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, list of leaders, May 3, 1857; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, list of leaders at front of minute book, microfilm reel M-1397, Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia (hereafter UVA).

⁵⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, record of Williams’s service on final page of minute book; Personal Record Book of Rev. Henry Williams, Jr., Gillfield Baptist Church, 1865-1875, Gillfield Baptist Church Records, 1827-1939, Accession #10041, microfilm reel M-1397, Small Special Collections Library, UVA; William H. Johnson, *A Sketch of the Life of Reverend Henry Williams, D.D., Late Pastor of the Gillfield Baptist Church, Petersburg, Virginia...* (Petersburg, VA: Fenn & Owen, 1901), 5-6; Kennard, *Short History of the Gillfield Baptist Church*, 19-21; Luther P. Jackson, *A Short History of the Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg, Virginia*, compiled by F.H. Norris (Petersburg: Virginia Printing Co., Inc., 1937), 17-18, 44.

⁶⁰ *Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia, Assembled at Ebenezer Church, Richmond, August 11th, 1865*, 4, 9-10, Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, <http://sceti.library.upenn.edu> (accessed Feb. 23, 2012).

been—after the city fell and the war ended in April 1865. When a group of northern black soldiers threatened white pastor Robert Ryland after hearing him preach a “rebel” sermon—apparently discouraging congregants from enlisting in the Union army—members of his congregation actually pleaded with the soldiers not to arrest him.⁶¹ Ryland soon offered his resignation to the church, believing that the congregation would “*naturally and justly* prefer a minister of their own color.” At first, the congregation voted to reject his resignation, but eventually accepted it with “mutual kindness and good will.”⁶² The church initially elected Gilbert Stockwell, a northern white anti-slavery Baptist, to serve as pastor, but in 1867, the Reverend James H. Holmes, who had been baptized by Ryland while a slave and who had served as one of First African’s deacons before the war, took over as the church’s first black pastor.⁶³

Since they were generally the only communal spaces owned and managed by blacks, African American church buildings often served as political gathering places. In the summer of 1865, Norfolk blacks held a rally at the Catherine Street Baptist Church and published a pamphlet petitioning the United States government for black citizenship and equal suffrage.⁶⁴ About the same time in Richmond, Baptist preacher Fields Cook

⁶¹ *New York Examiner and Chronicle*, Apr. 20, 1865; *Philadelphia Press*, Apr. 12, 1865, cited in O’Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 95-97; Thomas Morris Chester, “Richmond, Apr. 10, 1865,” in J.R.M. Blackett, ed., *Thomas Morris Chester, Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Virginia Front* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 302.

⁶² Robert Ryland, “Origin of the First African Church,” in *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, 1780-1880* (Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), 264; O’Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 97.

⁶³ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930, Apr. 26, 1856, LVA; *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1866*, front matter, AABAR, microfilm reel 101; O’Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 97; Charles F. Irons, “And All These Things Shall Be Added Unto You: The First African Baptist Church, Richmond, 1841-1865,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 47 (Winter 1998), 35; Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 258.

⁶⁴ *Equal Suffrage. Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va., to the People of the United States...* (New Bedford, MA: E. Anthony and Sons, 1865), Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, <http://sceti.library.upenn.edu> (accessed Jun. 6, 2012).

helped organize a meeting at First African to protest the treatment of local blacks by Federal soldiers. After Cook led a delegation to meet with Gen. Oliver O. Howard of the Freedmen's Bureau and President Andrew Johnson, the military government eliminated its pass and curfew regulations for blacks and set up courts that accepted black testimony. Cook went on to hold offices in state and national African American organizations, as well as working as a local activist for the Republican Party and running unsuccessfully for the U.S. Congress in 1869.⁶⁵

Like First African, Second African and Ebenezer churches in Richmond appointed black pastors, northern migrants Pleasant Bowler and Peter Randolph, at the end of the war.⁶⁶ The white Second Baptist Church had overseen Second African since its establishment in the 1840s. Second Baptist reported that, upon the Federal army's occupation of Richmond, blacks at Second African held an informal meeting without the knowledge of the white supervisory committee and invited Pleasant Bowler, "a mulatto man from one of the Northern States," to fill the office of pastor. Within a short period, however, Bowler made enemies at Second African, and members requested aid from the

⁶⁵ John T. O'Brien and the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, "Fields Cook (ca. 1817–1897)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, ed. Sara Bearss and Brendan Wolfe, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, 22 Nov. 2011, http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Cook_Fields_ca_1817-1897 (accessed Jun. 6, 2012); Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 49. For more on Fields Cook's life before the Civil War, including a brief discussion of post-Nat Turner Virginia, see Mary J. Bratton, ed., *Fields's Observations: The Slave Narrative of a Nineteenth-Century Virginian*, available online at Documenting the American South. University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter DocSouth), added 2004, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/fields/fields.html> (accessed Aug. 16, 2012).

⁶⁶ *Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1865*, 4; Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, 1858-1876, May 21, 1865, LVA; Peter Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit: The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1893), 87, available online at DocSouth, added 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/randolph/randolph.html> (accessed Mar. 29, 2012). For a short history of Ebenezer, as well as other black churches in Virginia, see Personal Record Book of Rev. Henry Williams, Jr. Other Baptist churches in Richmond appointed local blacks as pastors: Manchester African elected Richard Wells; Fourth African chose Scott Gwathmey, and Fifth African selected George Daggett. O'Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 270; *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1866*, front matter; Historical Records Survey of Virginia, Works Projects Administration, *Inventory of the Church Archives of Virginia: Negro Baptist Churches in Richmond* (Richmond: Historical Records Survey of Virginia, 1940), 18-19.

Freedmen's Court in removing him after he refused to resign. According to Second Baptist's records, the black church had discovered Bowler's involvement in "crimes too shocking to relate."⁶⁷

Disappointed that the black leaders at Second African had circumvented the white committee in electing Bowler, and believing that the church should still receive white guidance, whites at Second Baptist nevertheless admitted in January 1866 that, because of the war, the relationship between the two churches was "forever severed."⁶⁸ Second African faced a more serious hardship a few months later when its building burned down. Along with housing a black school, the church building had served as a headquarters for blacks who were organizing a parade to celebrate the anniversary of Richmond's fall on April 3—a festivity sharply criticized by many whites in the city.⁶⁹ The fact that the church caught fire the day before the celebration was to take place seemed to point to the work of an arsonist, although the charge was not proved. One Sunday school teacher from the New England Freedmen's Aid Society described the fire as a clear act of racial violence and recounted how, when she was looking at the charred ruins of the church on the day of the parade, a passing white man expressed disappointment that "it hadn't been

⁶⁷ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1843-1866, Jan. 21, 1866, VBHS. After his removal from Second African, Bowler took charge of a Methodist church in Richmond. Apparently finding himself at odds with members of that congregation as well, he was arrested for assaulting and threatening to kill a church trustee late in 1865. Although he was acquitted, this church, also with the help of the Freedmen's Court, removed him from leadership. Bowler had been active as a leader of the inaugural session of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association in August 1865, but he disappeared from that organization's records until 1871, when the association issued a formal warning against him. Their report stated that this "wicked and dangerous man" had "committed depredations of lewdness," threatened violence, and engaged in gambling, drunkenness, and "other unholy practices." Seeking to dissociate themselves from Bowler and "warn the world of this impostor," the committee advocated the publication of their report in newspapers across the region. *Minutes...of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia... 1865*, 4, 6, 9; *Minutes of the...Shiloh Colored Baptist Association of Virginia...1871*, 11-12. See also *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 6, 1866, cited in O'Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 270-73.

⁶⁸ Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1843-1866, Jan. 21, 1866, VBHS; see also *The History and Chronology of Second Baptist Church...1846-1996* ([Richmond, VA: Second Baptist Church], 1996), LVA.

⁶⁹ *Richmond Whig*, Mar. 27 and Apr. 10, 1866; see also O'Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 339.

burned to-day when 'twould be full of the ___ niggers."⁷⁰ According to the *Richmond Examiner*, however, the claim that the church had been burned down by whites was "too preposterous to be entertained for a moment." In the minds of the police and fire department chief, the fire was purely accidental, "resulting from the carelessness of those engaged in preparing for the fair." The author of this piece recognized that such a tragedy fell "heavily upon the poor negroes," many of whom suffered in "poverty and distress," but only "sympathize[d] with them that far."⁷¹

Just one month later, a seemingly clearer case of arson occurred in Petersburg, when both the black First Baptist Church on Harrison Street and a black Methodist church were destroyed by fire on a single night, and an apparent attempt also was made to destroy the Gillfield church. The *Petersburg Index* identified the fires as criminal acts, and went on to express "unqualified reproach" of such "villainy."⁷² If indeed they were the work of arsonists, which seems likely, these incidents probably reflected white hostility toward newly independent black congregations and their expanding educational and political communities. Yet there were also white men and women who maintained their support for black churches after the war; according to a church history, "leading white citizens" of Petersburg subscribed \$3,000 to help rebuild First Baptist after the fire.⁷³

⁷⁰ *Freedmen's Record* 2 (Jun. 1866), 115-17, cited in O'Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 339.

⁷¹ *Richmond Examiner*, Apr. 9, 1866.

⁷² See text from the *Petersburg Index* within a *Harper's Weekly* article, May 19, 1866. See also *Petersburg Index*, May 12, 1866. The Colored Shiloh Baptist Association lamented that several church buildings had been destroyed by fire that year, but did not identify which ones. *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia... 1866*, 8. *Harper's Weekly*, May 19, 1866. See text from the *Petersburg Index* within the *Harper's* article, and the *Petersburg Index*, May 12, 1866, for responses to the fires and to the northern press coverage of them.

⁷³ William Henry Sherwood, "History of the Church, From 1756 to 1885," in *Life of Charles B. W. Gordon, Pastor of the First Baptist Church, Petersburg, Virginia, and History of the Church* (Petersburg, VA: John B. Ege, 1885), 54, Special Collections, LVA.

The war brought challenges to Ebenezer Baptist in Richmond as well, particularly when people applied for membership without letters of dismissal from their former churches. Wartime developments had no doubt interfered with people's ability to secure letters, since some churches had ceased meeting for a period and others were in territory controlled by an opposing army. Ebenezer's leaders adapted by taking these applicants "under care of the church," but it is not clear whether or when they became full members.⁷⁴ Ebenezer stood by its white minister, William Lindsay, until the end of the war. In 1864, Martha Butler was called before the black deacons to "say why she talked about the Pastor in the Market."⁷⁵ Apparently the church leaders would not tolerate disrespectful attitudes toward the pastor, particularly in public, and the congregation reelected him at the end of that year. A month after Richmond surrendered, however, a black pastor, Peter Randolph, took office, yet another example of how black churches responded quickly to the fall of the Confederacy.⁷⁶

Born a slave in Prince George County around 1825, Randolph gained his freedom in 1847 after a legal battle following his master's death, moved to Boston, and became active as a Baptist preacher, missionary, and antislavery advocate throughout New England. His service as a chaplain for a black regiment brought him back to Richmond at the end of the war.⁷⁷ He soon encountered black and white Baptist leaders there, such as John Jasper and white pastor Jeremiah Jeter, who had helped to establish the First African church in the early 1840s. In his autobiography, Randolph recollected how Jeter

⁷⁴ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1, 1864 for Besty Owens; see minutes throughout 1864 for other examples of people "taken under care" of the church.

⁷⁵ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 13, 1864.

⁷⁶ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 11, 1864, May 21, 1865.

⁷⁷ Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit*, 9-57.

sometimes attended his sermons at Ebenezer, sitting in front, nodding his head, and remarking that Randolph was “as good a colored preacher as he ever heard.”⁷⁸

Randolph also became acquainted with Robert Ryland when he visited First African, apparently a few months before Ryland resigned as pastor there in 1865. Upon their first meeting, Randolph later related, Ryland told the black pastor that a large number of his parishioners had been sold South, and thinking Randolph a New England native, mentioned that slavery in Virginia had been mild compared with the same institution in more southerly regions. By Randolph’s account, he surprised Ryland by revealing that he had “tasted much of the bitter cup of slavery” in Virginia himself.⁷⁹

Writing years later, Randolph denounced Ryland’s passivity in dealing with slavery’s torments, but he also remembered Ryland’s “good characteristics” and his “long intimate relation with the colored people.” Ryland served as one of the first instructors at the Richmond Theological Institute, a seminary for black ministers formed by Boston abolitionist Nathaniel Colver after the war. As one of his former students at the institute, Randolph recalled that Ryland was a “good biblical scholar” and that the students “all loved him, regardless of his slave-holding proclivities.”⁸⁰ Ryland’s interactions with black students and leaders such as Randolph suggest that the complexities that had attended his relationship with his black parishioners before the war continued to

⁷⁸ Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit*, 60, 73-75, quotation on 74. Randolph recalled how, at one point, he spoke with Jeter about slavery. Jeter deemed it a “divine and right institution,” but, Randolph noted, the white pastor neglected to mention the Golden Rule. According to Randolph, Jeter concluded by admitting that he hoped his own views were wrong, a comment that perplexed Randolph, unless Jeter “felt the compunctions of conscience.” Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit*, 75.

⁷⁹ Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit*, 76-78.

⁸⁰ Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit*, 76-78. For more on the Richmond Theological Seminary, which originally met in the former slave market of Lumpkin’s Jail, see Charles H. Corey, *A History of the Richmond Theological Seminary* (Richmond, VA: J.W. Randolph, 1895).

characterize Ryland—and likely certain other white Baptists as well—after the Civil War and emancipation.

For leaders such as Peter Randolph, Lewis Tucker, and Henry Williams, the need for black Baptist congregations to organize into associations was obvious. Established in 1864 for churches in areas occupied by the Federal army, the Norfolk, Virginia, Union Baptist Association was soon joined by the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association, which united churches in and around Richmond and Petersburg a few months after the war ended in 1865.⁸¹ These associations offered forums for black churches to discuss pressing issues, collect church data, pool financial resources, solicit contributions, and send missionaries to churches that lacked leadership. Structured much like the Dover and Portsmouth Associations, these groups could not legislate or dictate to individual congregations, but instead served to assist and advise their constituencies. The associations' delegates did have the power to accept or reject new congregations and to exclude existing ones for breaches of doctrine or practice. Each year, these organizations expanded as more black churches emerged—either on their own or by breaking from white churches—and sought incorporation.⁸² By 1868, black Baptists across Virginia

⁸¹ *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Norfolk, Virginia, Union Baptist Association...1868*. The records of the early sessions of the Norfolk Union Association were not found, but the "Fifth Annual" meeting took place in 1868, indicating when the association was formed. *Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...August 11, 1865*; Charles F. Irons, "Colored Shiloh Baptist Association," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, ed. Brendan Wolfe, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Aug. 9, 2012, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Colored_Shiloh_Baptist_Association (accessed Oct. 30, 2012).

⁸² In 1865, there were seven churches in the Colored Shiloh Association, with a total of 9,674 members. By 1872, the association included 236 churches with a total membership of 47,597. *Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1865*, "Constitution," "Rules of Order," and p. 4 (for churches and statistics); *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1866*, "Constitution"; *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association...1872*, 15-18.

joined to form a state convention, seeking independence from whites even as they adopted similar forms of governance.⁸³

The inaugural ceremony of the Shiloh Association in August 1865 included sermons and “fervent prayers” by black leaders, including Randolph. The delegates rejoiced that blacks were no longer “under the tyrant’s lash” and that, as “God’s freedmen,” they had entered the “Canaan of liberty.” The clerk averred that it would have “melted the hearts of [their] oppressors to have witnessed this heavenly scene.” At the same gathering, Randolph, along with black ministers Daniel Jackson and Pleasant Bowler, joined white minister William Lindsay—formerly pastor of Ebenezer Baptist—in ordaining a group of black men to the ministry.⁸⁴ As in the ordination of Lewis Tucker of Norfolk in 1863, Lindsay’s involvement was probably sought by Shiloh’s black leaders since so few black ministers had been ordained by this point. The inclusion of a white pastor in the ceremony also demonstrates that, in separating from white churches and associations, black leaders did not harbor hostility toward white Baptists categorically, nor did they wholly reject the ecclesiastical authority of white ministers.

During the postwar period, discussions at these associational meetings centered on four major issues: temperance, education, ministerial qualifications, and relations with whites. Seeking moral and institutional respectability in a society largely hostile to emancipation, black Baptist leaders maintained stringent behavioral standards and advocated freedpeople’s advancement through Biblical doctrine, personal discipline, and widespread education. The associations demonstrated a desire to standardize and regulate doctrine and practice, offering support to established and fledgling local

⁸³ *Minutes of the First Anniversary of the Virginia Baptist State Convention, Held in Norfolk, Virginia, May 13th to 15th, A.D. 1868, AABAR*, microfilm reel 92.

⁸⁴ *Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1865*, 5-6, 9.

churches and benevolent organizations. Though increasingly separate from whites, black Baptists after the war upheld many of the same theological principles and procedures they had long shared with white fellow Baptists.⁸⁵

Thus temperance, long a favorite Baptist cause, found a place in the discussions of black clergy and laity. In 1868, the Shiloh Association recommended that its churches forbid the use of “intoxicating drinks” by their members and ministers.⁸⁶ The Norfolk Union Association likewise discountenanced alcoholic beverages and even warned its pastors to preach against the “immoral, indecent, and unchristian-like” use of tobacco.⁸⁷ Both associations were particularly concerned that church leaders remain temperate, or indeed that they abstain from drinking altogether. In 1866, Norfolk voted to reject any delegate known to partake of “ardent spirits,” and in 1871, Shiloh reminded its ministers to “desist from drinking liquors of any kind” aside from those for medicinal purposes.⁸⁸ Pastors such as Lewis Tucker periodically gave sermons on the subject of temperance at associational meetings.⁸⁹

At its first session in 1868, the black state convention formed a standing committee specifically to further the temperance cause, alongside other committees such

⁸⁵ As Floyd Cunningham argues, many postwar black Baptist leaders had a “deep sense of Biblical authority” and believed that “too many parishioners...failed to live by biblical standards and thereby jeopardized the social advancement of the entire people.” Floyd T. Cunningham, “Wandering in the Wilderness: Black Baptist Thought After Emancipation,” in *Church and Community Among Black Southerners, 1865-1900*, ed. Donald G. Nieman, Vol. 9 of *African American Life in the Post-Emancipation South, 1861-1900: A Twelve Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles*, ed. Donald G. Nieman, 186-99, quotations on 188-89 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994); orig. pub. in *American Baptist Quarterly* 4 (1985), 268-81.

⁸⁶ *Journal of Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1868*, 15.

⁸⁷ *Minutes of the...Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association...1869*, 6; *Minutes of the Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association...1868*, 9.

⁸⁸ *Minutes of the...Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association...1869*, addenda; *Minutes of the...Shiloh Colored Baptist Association of Virginia...1871*, 14. Norfolk also later voted to reject delegates who traded or trafficked in liquor. *Minutes of the...Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association...1871*, 8.

⁸⁹ *Minutes of the...Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association...1871*, 4; *Minutes of the...Norfolk, Virginia Union Baptist Association...1872*, 5.

as those for finance, education, and Sabbath schools.⁹⁰ This committee persuaded the convention to reject any church with an imbibing minister or membership, declaring intemperance as “detrimental to the cause of Christ” and “ruinous to the souls of men.”⁹¹ The following year, the convention additionally recommended that churches refuse to ordain or grant preaching licenses to any person caught drinking alcohol.⁹² In 1874, the temperance committee once again decried “King Alcohol” having “grown to such gigantic proportions” in the country, pledging to “do all in [its] power to arrest his encroachments” by shunning intemperate ministers and members.⁹³ While these positions exemplify the strength of the temperance movement among nineteenth-century evangelicals of both races, blacks had an added incentive to maintain morally upright congregations to counter the aspersions of white critics.⁹⁴

In addition to acting as avid supporters of the temperance movement, African American women served as leaders in a host of benevolent societies. These organizations, which generally focused on charity and mission work, expanded dramatically in the postwar period.⁹⁵ By 1871, twenty-three benevolent groups were

⁹⁰ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1868*, “Rules of Order.”

⁹¹ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1868*, 17.

⁹² *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1869*, 22; *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1870*, 11; *Minutes of the ... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1871*, 20.

⁹³ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1874*, 19.

⁹⁴ Interestingly, the records of the white Virginia Baptist associations contain fewer resolutions concerning temperance than black associations in the late 1860s; temperance seems to have been more of a focus for black Baptist leaders at the time. Yet the prohibition movement did remain a force among southern whites throughout the late nineteenth century, and Ted Ownby discusses whites’ particular concern about drunkenness among blacks. Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, & Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 170-73; see also Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212.

⁹⁵ Kathleen Berkeley argues that, because under slavery, “black women shouldered the responsibility for nurturing and caring for the health and well-being of both the family and community,” they “felt a special responsibility” for social welfare after the war. Berkeley, “Colored Ladies Also Contributed’: Black Women’s Activities from Benevolence to Social Welfare, 1866-1896,” in *Church and Community Among Black Southerners*, ed. Nieman, 327-49, quotation on 330. See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham,

represented at the Virginia State Convention. Most of these groups, such as the Gillfield Good Samaritans, the Loving Sisters of Worship of Petersburg, and the Harrison Street Missionary Daughters, had female presidents and sent female delegates to the association meetings. These organizations, which frequently arose in urban churches, also presented sizable contributions to the state convention treasury; the Gillfield Daughters raised \$105 for the convention in 1871.⁹⁶ While the vast majority of black Baptist leaders were men, women played important roles at association meetings. Three out of the seven “life members” of the state convention were women—a position that one could attain by paying ten dollars as opposed to the annual membership of one dollar. Elizabeth Tucker of Norfolk and Madaline Williams of Petersburg evidently joined alongside their pastor husbands, but Lucy Ann Wallace of Petersburg does not appear to have been associated with any male member.⁹⁷ Many of the state convention’s annual members, too, were women—almost 50 percent in 1870.⁹⁸

Although temperance and benevolent work held the attention of black Baptist leaders, their concern for religious and secular education outstripped even their campaign against alcohol. As in white associations, the enrollment and resources devoted to Sabbath schools increased significantly in the postbellum years. Ministers were exhorted by the black associations to do all in their power to have the children in their congregations attend Sunday school. The state convention established a Sabbath School Union to oversee and assist Virginia’s black Sunday schools in 1869, keeping careful records of the number of schools, teachers, and books in the schools’ libraries. The state

Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-18; Kimball, *American City, Southern Place*, 259.

⁹⁶ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention... 1871*, 31.

⁹⁷ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention... 1869*, 29.

⁹⁸ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention... 1870*, 23-24.

convention also endorsed the publications of northern Baptist Sabbath school organizations.⁹⁹ The members of the Norfolk Association asserted that Sabbath schools were “one of the powerful engines in operating upon the world.”¹⁰⁰

The desire for education extended beyond Sunday mornings, and black Baptist associations formed committees on general education as well as Sabbath schools. The members of the state convention saw education as essential for “defend[ing] the Gospel of Christ, our country, and ourselves as christians and citizens.” The convention implored parents to see that their children were well trained, for “KNOWLEDGE IS POWER.”¹⁰¹ Grateful for the assistance of northern missionaries and the Freedmen’s Bureau, black Virginia Baptist leaders nonetheless urged their congregations to “practice self-reliance.”¹⁰² Even after the emergence of tax-supported “free schools,” the state convention recommended aid for missionaries in those parts of the state that still lacked schools.¹⁰³ When addressing his district association in 1872, Leonard Black, pastor of Norfolk’s First Baptist (Bute Street), urged parents: “send your children to school—educate your sons and daughters—learn to keep your own accounts—write your own letters—go to day schools, go to night schools.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ *Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1865*, 5; *Minutes of the...Colored Shiloh Baptist Association...1872*, 6, 8; *Minutes of the...Norfolk Virginia Union Baptist Association...1872*, 12; *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1868*, 15-16; *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1869*, 18; *Minutes...of the Virginia Baptist State Convention...1870*, 28; *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1871*, 19-20.

¹⁰⁰ *Minutes of the...Norfolk Virginia Union Baptist Association...1872*, 12.

¹⁰¹ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1869*, 19.

¹⁰² *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1870*, 15. For more on the activities of the national Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention, see James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004 [orig. pub. 1986]), 78-131; Leroy Fitts, *A History of Black Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 69-78.

¹⁰³ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1871*, 19; *Minutes of the Virginia Baptist State Convention...1874*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ *Minutes of the... Norfolk Virginia Union Baptist Association...1872*, 10. Elder William Troy also emphasized the importance of “mental improvement” at the meeting of the Colored Shiloh Association that year. *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1872*, 6.

Many black Baptists believed that the keys to personal and communal advancement were found in church basements and schoolhouses; like temperance, education and “self-reliance” offered means for blacks to assert their independence from whites, fend off racist criticism, and improve themselves generally. One of blacks’ main concerns in the realm of education was the training of ministers; black Baptist leaders continually bemoaned the uneducated clergy. The days of the unschooled folk preachers—once accepted in Baptist circles—were now in the past, many leaders hoped. As the nineteenth century progressed, black and white Baptists alike increasingly advocated formal instruction for the ministry.

Soon after the war, black Baptist organizations began implementing requirements for licensing and ordination. In order to take the pulpit, the Shiloh Association resolved in 1865, a minister must have proven himself “well read in the scriptures and other useful works.”¹⁰⁵ The following year, Shiloh expressed concern that unqualified and unlicensed preachers were doing harm to the community of freedpeople and exhorted the churches not to countenance unregulated religious activity.¹⁰⁶ Shiloh particularly deplored the fact that “unordained and unworthy” preachers were sometimes performing baptisms and administering communion.¹⁰⁷ A minister should receive ordination through the proper channels, the association reminded its constituents—namely, in a ceremony performed by two or three ordained clergymen.¹⁰⁸

The state convention even protested that some preachers had sought ordination through “deception, fraud and trickery,” when in fact “an office should seek a man, and

¹⁰⁵ *Minutes and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1865*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Minutes of the...Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1866*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ *Journal of Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1867*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Journal of Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1867*, 6; see also *Minutes of the...Colored Shiloh Baptist Association...1873*, 10.

not man an office.”¹⁰⁹ To weed out “false ministers,” the convention appointed a delegate from each county to examine the credentials of any minister who sought admission into the organization.¹¹⁰ A few Baptist ministers were actually blacklisted by the associations. After the members of the Harrison Street church excommunicated their pastor, John H. Gains, for committing a “heinous crime,” the Shiloh Association and black Baptist newspaper *Shiloh Herald* published a notice of their action.¹¹¹ Likewise, the Shiloh Association posted a scathing account of Pleasant Bowler’s downfall, discussed above.¹¹² The state convention printed a letter naming Randall Woldridge as an illiterate preacher who allegedly had threatened to whip the author of the letter for not recognizing Woldridge as a minister. The author claimed that he slept outside on a “cold night in February” rather than recognize Woldridge as “a shepherd over the members of the church.”¹¹³ In 1870, the Shiloh Association adopted Pastor Henry Williams’s proposal that any man who did not live with his wife be barred from the ministry.¹¹⁴ Clearly, black Baptists were not afraid to name names or maintain strict standards in order to protect the integrity of the clergy.

In addition to their concerns regarding licensing and ordination, black Baptist leaders feared that black ministers lacked adequate education and training. Nelson Hamelton, a deacon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, responded to such concerns in 1866 by

¹⁰⁹ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1869*, 21.

¹¹⁰ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1873*, 11.

¹¹¹ *Minutes of the...Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1870*, 11. Harrison Street requested Gillfield Baptist’s assistance in investigating Gains, Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jun. 6, 1870. Henry Williams also served as editor of the *Shiloh Herald*. Michael Whitt, “Free Indeed! Trials and Triumphs of Enslaved and Freemen in Antebellum Virginia,” *The Virginia Baptist Register* 50 (2011), 2906-07.

¹¹² *Minutes of the...Shiloh Colored Baptist Association...1871*, 11.

¹¹³ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1871*, 26.

¹¹⁴ *Minutes of the...Colored Shiloh Baptist Association...1870*, 8.

resigning his position as deacon to pursue the “study of the ministry.”¹¹⁵ E.G. Corprew of Zion Baptist in Portsmouth, while serving as corresponding secretary of the state convention, lamented that “the people are in darkness, and many of the ministering brethren are not prepared to enlighten them.”¹¹⁶ Shiloh’s delegates also discussed an “intellectual deficiency” among its ministers in 1868 and voted to denounce the ordination of any person “not able to read and write, well read in the Scriptures, and well posted in church government.”¹¹⁷ A few years later, the association recommended that its churches do their utmost to support their ministers so that these men could spend time on their own “mental improvement.”¹¹⁸ Pastor Leonard Black also pleaded with ministers to “read more and run less—study, study hard, that you may understand what you read and to [sic] preach.”¹¹⁹

Black Baptist organizations heartily promoted the seminaries formed by northern missionaries after the war, such as Nathaniel Colver’s Theological Institute in Richmond. In 1868, the state convention urged its ministers to attend a new Ministers’ Institute in Richmond in order to promote the “healthful upbuilding” of black churches.¹²⁰ After recommending Colver’s school to its members, the Shiloh Association added that it would also endorse the established Baptist institutions when they “shall open their doors and admit colored students.”¹²¹ In his address to the Virginia State Convention in 1871,

¹¹⁵ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 10, 1866.

¹¹⁶ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention... 1870*, 9.

¹¹⁷ *Journal of Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia... 1868*, 12; see also *Minutes of the... Norfolk Virginia Union Baptist Association... 1871*, 8.

¹¹⁸ *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia... 1872*, 9.

¹¹⁹ *Minutes of the... Norfolk Virginia Union Baptist Association... 1872*, 10.

¹²⁰ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention... 1868*, 17. For more on the Richmond Institute, see William Cathcart, ed., *The Baptist Encyclopedia...*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 984-86.

¹²¹ *Journal of Proceedings... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association... 1867*, 8; see also *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia... 1870*, 8.

E.G. Corprew decried the ignorance of certain black ministers—encouraged, he alleged, by “a few unprincipled, evil-minded” white Baptist preachers who opposed “the religious progress and moral and intellectual improvement of the colored race.”¹²² Black Baptists maintained this posture in most of their relations with whites during the postwar period: a willingness to practice fellowship with white brethren, but only on terms of fairness and mutual respect.

The interactions between black and white Baptist leaders in early Reconstruction, were riddled with complexities and inconsistencies, much as they had been before the Civil War. Overall, blacks sought independence from white control, but they also looked for opportunities to prove themselves upright and educated as well as avenues to maintain fraternal connections with whites. White leaders generally hoped to keep black Baptists under their supervision even as they encouraged racial separation in religious activity. They expressed paternalistic concern—sometimes heartfelt—for the souls of their black brethren, but appeared unwilling to cede much ground in the realm of racial hierarchy. At times the goals, values, and methods of black and white ministers coincided—all upheld the importance of moral standards and schooling in the churches and in the ministry, sought to spread the gospel, and employed extensive associations, committees, and fundraising projects to achieve these ends. Yet while their values often intersected, each group now operated mostly on its own side of the color line.

Black Baptist leaders celebrated the blessings of emancipation—freedom to build their own churches, conduct their own Sunday schools, ordain their own ministers, and “conduct, under the guidance of the Scriptures and the spirit of Christ, all of [their]

¹²² *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1871*, 15-16; *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1872*, 25.

ecclesiastical affairs.”¹²³ Laying claim to freedom, autonomy, and full American citizenship, the Shiloh Association recommended in 1867 that its members remove the title “African” from their church names, declaring that “we are not Africans, but Americans.”¹²⁴

Pastor Henry Williams of Gillfield Baptist sparked a heated controversy with whites at the Shiloh association’s meeting in 1867 when, upon receiving the Cold Spring Church of Southampton County into the association, he apparently asked all the delegates to stand and recognize this body, allegedly stating that the church was “located where Nat Turner first struck for freedom.” When word got out that a black elder had invoked the memory of the bloody rebellion, the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* published a vehement denunciation of Williams’s “bad-hearted act.” Black leaders would “better serve the cause of Christianity” and “better advance the interests of the colored people,” the editorial stated, if they would promote the “kind and conciliatory feeling which is indispensable for peaceful and prosperous relations between the blacks and the whites,” and refrain from dragging up such “revolting recollections.”¹²⁵ The controversy soon died down, but it may have reinforced white misgivings about the activities of the black Baptist organization.

¹²³ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1869*, 20-21.

¹²⁴ *Journal of Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1867*, 5.

¹²⁵ *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), Aug. 9 and 12, 1867. For a more detailed discussion of the press’s reaction to Williams’s comment, including the insightful response of a Republican Richmond newspaper to the *Dispatch*’s article, see Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 243-44, and Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 140-43. Both Crofts and French only cite the *Dispatch*’s publication of the Shiloh Association minutes as the source for Williams’s statement, instead of citing the Shiloh minutes themselves. Interestingly, Williams’s remark does not appear in the Shiloh minutes for 1867, which only reported Williams’s request that Cold Spring be received “by all the delegates standing.” Either the clerk and publisher of Shiloh’s minutes did not think William’s statement important enough to include in its records or the *Dispatch* (or its source) exaggerated the incident. *Journals and Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1867*, 3.

Many black evangelicals were more than ready to integrate their faith with political awareness and action. At the same meeting as discussed above, the Shiloh Association expressed its gratitude to the United States government for passing Reconstruction Acts to enfranchise blacks and to grant them other rights of citizenship. The association advised its members to exercise their vote wisely, remembering the Proverb that “when the righteous are in authority the people rejoice.”¹²⁶ The black state convention voiced similar thanks to the federal government at its first meeting in 1868.¹²⁷ When Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner died in 1874, the state convention appointed a committee to commemorate this “friend of the colored race,” who had crusaded for black rights as an antislavery politician before the war and as a leader of the Radical Republicans in the Reconstruction years.¹²⁸

Shiloh’s delegates seem to have taken a pragmatic approach to white Baptist brethren. The delegates called for churches to pursue a “continual interchange of brotherly feeling” in 1866. They accepted the fact, however, that “color may stay with color,” even as they hoped that “all colors [would] *practice* the spirit of Christ.”¹²⁹ When some whites failed to maintain this standard by refusing to hear black ministers, Shiloh resolved that it was a “condescension of manhood and ministerial dignity” for its ministers to invite whites into their pulpits when whites would not “extend the same courtesy to them, the color alone being the excuse or barrier.” The fact that God “made

¹²⁶ *Journal of Proceedings of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1867*, 6. Prov. 29:2 (King James Version).

¹²⁷ *Minutes of the... Virginia Baptist State Convention...1868*, 18.

¹²⁸ *Minutes of the Virginia Baptist State Convention...1874*, 13.

¹²⁹ *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association...1866*, 6.

of one blood all the nations of men who dwell on the face of the earth” mandated equality in church fellowship.¹³⁰

Despite their disappointment with whites’ prejudices, some blacks still saw the importance of tangible interracial bonds. B.T. Edwards, the clerk of the Shiloh Association, for instance, wrote in 1870 that his “heart was filled with joy” at the “good feeling” shown between blacks and whites at the association meeting in Charlottesville (apparently some whites were present at the gathering). Edwards “sincerely desired...that spirit of brotherly love and friendly intercourse” to extend across Virginia.¹³¹ When the Shiloh Association held its annual gathering in Richmond in 1871, Jeremiah Jeter expressed his regret, as well as that of other white ministers, for not being able to attend the black association until its third day of business because of other commitments. Jeter then complimented the black delegates for the “dignified and intelligent manner” in which they governed the meeting.¹³² Apparently at least some white clergy were still attempting to maintain connections with black Baptist organizations as late as 1871.

It is not clear whether black delegates attended meetings of the white district associations with any frequency; it does seem clear that cross-racial contacts were often one-sided, with most of the hospitable feelings emanating from the blacks. When black elder Richard Wells attempted to represent the black Virginia Baptist State Convention at the white General Association in 1871, he was met with a cold response, particularly from none other than Jeremiah Jeter. Discussed in more depth below, this incident suggests the persistence of white Baptists’ paternalistic views of their black brethren;

¹³⁰ *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia...1870*, 11-12.

¹³¹ *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association...1870*, 16.

¹³² *Minutes of the...Shiloh Colored Baptist Association of Virginia...1871*, 7.

they wanted to attend and observe the work of black associations, but did not seem to reciprocate when black delegates came calling.¹³³

Still, amicable exchanges between blacks and whites did occur in postwar Virginia, and black Baptists made note of these. The Norfolk Union Association interacted with local white leaders—the president of the College of William and Mary gave the entire black delegation a tour of the school when the association met in Williamsburg in 1872.¹³⁴ Likewise, when the black Baptist state convention was held in Fredericksburg, the delegates expressed their thanks to local citizens “both white and colored” for their hospitality. The black Baptists expressed similar appreciation to black and white evangelicals in the town of Liberty a few years later.¹³⁵ The minutes do not specify whether white families actually hosted black delegates during these conventions, but the sentiments of the black representatives do point to notably positive cross-racial interactions between local whites and black evangelical leaders.

White Baptist luminaries offered numerous expressions of goodwill and concern for black brethren in the post-emancipation period. Yet such sentiments generally echoed the paternalistic rhetoric of antebellum white evangelicals, with blacks subordinate to whites in a fellowship carried out on white terms. In 1865, the white General Association responded to the change in “civil relations” by reasserting whites’ obligation to persevere in the “work of instruction and evangelization” of blacks. First and foremost, white

¹³³ *Minutes of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1871*, 33, 40; *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1872*, 14.

¹³⁴ *Minutes of the...Norfolk Virginia Union Baptist Association...1872*, 3.

¹³⁵ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1870*, 18; *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1874*, 22. Historian Kenneth Bailey offers a more broadly positive view, writing that “there was an interval after the war during which extracongregational religious bonds between the races were widely advocated, during which serious efforts to perpetuate and extend them were in fact undertaken, and during which successful culminations seemed a possibility.” Bailey, “Post-Civil War Racial Separations,” 458.

Baptists needed to “resist and counteract all influences tending to alienate the confidence and affections of this class of our people from the white population.” Bitterness and “jealousies between the races,” the white association said, hindered attempts to influence the “spiritual enlightenment and elevation” of black men and women. As before the war, concern for the souls of black brethren remained a central focus in the writings of white ministers.¹³⁶

At the same time, the General Association issued a warning against the efforts of northern missionaries, such as the American Home Mission Society. Insisting that the successes of antebellum black churches had been achieved through the work of white southern Baptists and their “colored brethren,” the association recommended that the Home Mission Society find a “less cultivated field of labor.”¹³⁷ The association also warned that, if extremists attempted to “preach politics rather than religion, to insist on equal suffrage rather than repentance,” or to set blacks against their “former masters and real friends,” then “years of self-denying evangelical toil” would be squandered.¹³⁸ These white southern evangelicals maintained a possessive posture toward blacks following emancipation, their suspicions of northern influence resembling in some ways their antebellum fears of abolitionist infiltration.

Believing that white southerners could best direct the freed population, the General Association urged all churches to fulfill the “sacred and important duty” to establish and promote Sunday schools for blacks, and it encouraged white leaders to train black ministers and teachers. The association also encouraged blacks to establish day

¹³⁶ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1865*, 11-12.

¹³⁷ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1865*, 16-17.

¹³⁸ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1865*, 17. The Home Mission Society assisted Ebenezer Baptist Church in paying Pastor Peter Randolph, for instance. Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 10, 1866.

schools for their children.¹³⁹ The paternalistic mindset lingered. In 1866, white pastor Addison Hall addressed the General Association regarding the “obligations” between blacks and whites. Although the master-slave connection had ceased, the two races, “members of one common family,” still should maintain a reciprocal relationship. Whites, “being the more enlightened race,” were required to “instruct and elevate the other.”¹⁴⁰ Describing southern whites as the “best friends” of freedpeople, Hall did at least argue that, just as legal bans on literary instruction had ended, prejudices against blacks should also cease. White Baptists should seize the opportunity to offer evangelical schooling to black congregants.¹⁴¹

Yet even Addison Hall could not deny the obvious: most black Baptists would rather strike out on their own than remain under white leadership. He recognized blacks’ right to exercise their “free choice” in such cases. White members should not force blacks to stay, nor should they force them out. Rather, “facilities and encouragements,” such as material assistance in building new churches, should be offered whatever the blacks’ decision.¹⁴² The Dover Association demonstrated a paternalistic spirit while still accepting the likelihood that black Baptists would depart from the common fold. At its session in September 1865, a committee reported that the African churches were in the midst of forming a separate association and recommended that Dover drop these congregations from its records. Those blacks who remained in white-led churches should be encouraged and steered toward “special meetings” to receive instruction as before. If

¹³⁹ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1866*, 21, 27-28.

¹⁴⁰ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1866*, 25-26.

¹⁴¹ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1866*, 25-26; see also *Minutes of the Baptist General Association...1867*, 26. See also Daniel, “Virginia Baptists and the Negro, 1865-1902,” 344-47.

¹⁴² *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1866*, 25-26.

any black members preferred to establish independent churches, however, local white leaders should offer their assistance in setting up worship.¹⁴³

At the same session, convened only a few months after the Civil War's end, Pastor Robert Ryland presented a circular letter to the members of the Dover Association that well encapsulated white Baptists' views of the war, emancipation, and their freed brethren's standing in the church and society. Like many southern white evangelicals, Ryland recommended that southern whites, though disappointed at the war's outcome, accept God's decision against the Confederacy with cheerful resignation. Next, he entreated readers to exhibit kind feelings and generosity toward freedpeople. Though tempted at every turn during the war to rise up against whites, Ryland said, blacks' "worst form of insubordination" had simply been to "leave quietly and join the standard of the enemy." Rather than resort to "neglect and obloquy"—or worse, "a vindictive spirit"—in order to "bring to pass the prediction often made that freedom would be a curse to them," whites should seek to make emancipation a beneficial change for both races.¹⁴⁴

Reminding his audience that blacks "belong to the great brotherhood of humanity" and were "members of the same communion" as whites, Ryland warned his audience not to widen the breach between the races. Instead, white Baptists should strive to elevate blacks' character and condition by upholding fellowship with them, expanding their "religious privileges," and fostering Sabbath schools and literacy. If southern

¹⁴³ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866*, 25. In her discussion of the postwar separation of white and black Christians, Beth Barton Schweiger exaggerates that "any sense of obligation to black brothers and sisters ended abruptly in the rapid segregation of congregations between 1865 and 1870." Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 110.

¹⁴⁴ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866*, 23, 26-29.

whites failed to do this, “strangers”—namely, northerners—would “come in and produce stronger alienation.” “Why should we contribute men and money to evangelize Africa, when we have Africa here, with all restriction of law removed?” Ryland wondered. Foremost a minister rather than a proslavery southerner, Ryland had always seen Virginia’s black codes as a hindrance to the true work of Christ.¹⁴⁵

While Ryland’s main concern was for blacks’ spiritual well-being, he also offered important comments on their social status and economic welfare, revealing a continued commitment to the paternalistic ethos. Since whites no longer provided for blacks’ material needs as masters, he said, they should encourage a work ethic through fair wages. Without adequate compensation, freedpeople, who had been accustomed to “work only from fear,” would lack all motivation to work and would resort to thievery, Ryland said. Starvation, disease and legal punishment would eventually lead to the “extinction of the race.” Should the “experiment” in freedom succeed, however, whites would “gather around [them] a thrifty peasantry cultivating your fields at an expense only a little greater, if not less than formerly.” Blacks would come to accept their “condition of dependence” and would serve as a faithful working class.¹⁴⁶

Ryland’s vision for a reconstructed South reflected the hopes of many southern whites. While advocating interracial fellowship, the education of blacks, the establishment of a reasonable wage system, and an increase in blacks’ religious rights (he did not specify which ones), the Richmond pastor and teacher still held fast to the old southern preference for paternalistic white dominance. Even so, Ryland was more progressive than many of his peers; throughout the postwar years, he maintained the

¹⁴⁵ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866, 27-28.*

¹⁴⁶ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866, 27-28.*

bifurcated view of blacks that had characterized his career before the war. Writing to a friend in 1867, he could not “but shed a tear over the sad desolations and blood-stained fields of war, while I feel thankful that slavery is gone forever!” His aim now was to “fit the freed for freedom, and to prevent the increase of that alienation of the two races.” Ryland’s personal mission included instructing black seminarians, “who seem anxious to learn, and whom it is a pleasure to teach,” five days a week. After one year at the seminary in Richmond, however, Ryland resigned his position to serve as principal of a college for young white women in Kentucky. He may have decided to move for financial reasons, the war having left his family practically destitute.¹⁴⁷

In its own response to emancipation, the Portsmouth Association condescendingly advocated that churches continue to offer the “privilege” of white-led religious instruction for black Baptists, believing that black ministers were generally “incompetent.” Like Dover, Portsmouth avowed the importance of maintaining positive relations with blacks and advised its members to act toward black congregants “in such a manner as to gain their confidence without sacrificing our self-respect.” In Baptist fashion, the association chose not to offer any specific recommendations for how churches ought to handle racial interactions and instruction, since views on the subject were “diverse and unsettled.”¹⁴⁸ Clearly, white Baptists’ hopes for harmonious

¹⁴⁷ Robert Ryland to R.H. Neale, Oct. 3, 1867, in “Reminiscences of College Days,” *Watchman and Reflector*, date of article unknown, article clipping in Robert Ryland Papers, VBHS; Garnett Ryland, *The Baptists of Virginia, 1699-1926* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist Board of Missions and Education, 1955), 309-310; Irons, “And All These Things,” 35; Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 111.

¹⁴⁸ *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1866*, 10. For an important example outside the region of this study, see the minutes of the Goshen Baptist Association (central Virginia), 1867, which expressed a desire to “ordain and set apart to the work of the gospel ministry” qualified black men, and, in its “general relations” with blacks, to “practice the utmost forbearance” and to “manifest the kindest feelings.” Thanks go to Michael Whitt of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society for pointing out this record.

interactions with blacks were undermined by their continued insistence on a racial hierarchy.

Despite their seemingly urgent desire to supervise and attend to blacks' spiritual needs, the white state and district associations eventually lost interest as black members left the organizations. After the black Virginia Baptist State Convention emerged in 1868, the General Association's records made scant references to black Baptists and stopped including black associations and churches in its rosters. In a report on Sabbath schools in 1869, the General Association mentioned that it was only listing white schools, since the "colored Baptist churches have their own State organizations, and their Sunday-school work is progressing well."¹⁴⁹ Such a statement gives further evidence of the complexity of white-black relations during this time. It seems that the white General Association was not writing black Sunday schools off contemptuously, yet it somehow managed to praise the black organizations even as it simultaneously upheld a separation based on race.

Overall, the relationship between the black and white Baptist associations deteriorated during the 1870s. In 1871, the black Virginia State Convention sent its president, Richard Wells, to the white General Association meeting in an attempt to establish a formal correspondence between the two bodies. The General Association responded by appointing a committee with Jeremiah Jeter as chairman. After stating that they "cordially reciprocate[d] the kind and Christian sentiments" sent from the black convention, the committee members resolved that, because of reasons which they "need not specify and cannot control," they thought it "inexpedient" to exchange corresponding

¹⁴⁹ *Minutes of the Baptist General Association of Virginia...1869*, 38; see also Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 125-26.

messengers with the black convention.¹⁵⁰ Black leaders were evidently attempting to maintain at least some connection with whites, who, while refusing to exchange delegates, still expressed their “friendly regards” and “hearty sympathy” to the black convention and their willingness to cooperate with blacks “as far as circumstances may permit.” Once again, the white association sent mixed messages and offered fellowship only on a conditional basis.¹⁵¹

Black leaders expressed varied responses to the white association’s standoffish response to Wells’s visit. When a white missionary advocate addressed the black Shiloh Association in 1873 and asserted the importance of a closer collaboration between black and white ministers, the session moderator simply replied, “Our doors are open.” At that point Wells himself spoke up, voicing his hope that the past could be buried and that the time would come when color distinctions would cease in Christian churches. Two other black elders, William Troy and William Walker, then stated that the “fear of social equality” seemed an obstacle to interracial cooperation and insisted that “colored men desir[ed] nothing of the sort,” for social contact between the races would “govern itself.”¹⁵² Certain black leaders appeared willing to make compromises with whites in order to remain in fellowship, yet others reacted to the General Association’s affront with dismay.

To make matters worse, Jeremiah Jeter, now editor of the *Religious Herald*, published a contentious discussion of Baptist race relations in that publication following the partial rejection of Wells’s overtures. Although he acknowledged “the humanity of the colored race...their equality with whites in the kingdom of heaven” and their

¹⁵⁰ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1872*, 14.

¹⁵¹ *Minutes of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1871*, 33, 40.

¹⁵² *Minutes of the...Colored Shiloh Baptist Association...1873*, 7.

“oneness with all disciples of Christ,” Jeter felt that “separate independent organizations” were needed. Arguing that “nature abhors the union” between the races, Jeter wrote that, if the white association accepted black delegates, it must “allow them to sit where they chose, in juxtaposition with our wives and daughters,” and whites would eventually have to invite blacks into their homes and to their tables. While whites were called to aid blacks in improving their social and spiritual condition, they were not called to erase “the line of demarcation that God in his wisdom and goodness has established between the races.”¹⁵³

In a spirited rebuttal, delegates to the black State Convention quoted a series of scriptures demonstrating that God was “no respecter of persons,” referring to God’s condemnation of partiality and favoritism. They also pointed out that black men and women had been members of white churches before emancipation, and that whites had not expressed any fear that fellowship might lead to social equality then. “Oh consistency thou art a jewel,” they added, and resolved to move forward despite being “cast off” by the white Baptists.¹⁵⁴ The convention decided to cease its attempts at connecting with the General Association and to “proceed separate and alone of them.” The convention delegates saw white Baptists’ “proffers of friendship [as] *hypocritical*” in light of their refusal to open a full dialogue with the black association.¹⁵⁵

Despite the sundering of ties between the black and white Baptist organizations, the white General Association still expressed a desire to promote black religious education in the early 1870s, stating that its members should assist black “young men of

¹⁵³ *Religious Herald*, Sept. 7, 1871; *Minutes of the Virginia Baptist State Convention...1872*, 26.

¹⁵⁴ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1872*, 26-27.

¹⁵⁵ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1872*, 14.

piety and suitable talents” in obtaining proper education for the ministry.¹⁵⁶ The General Association also continued to track the work of black Sabbath schools, applauding the American Baptist Publication Society’s appointment of black minister Walter Brooks as a “general Sunday-school missionary” for Virginia in 1874.¹⁵⁷ Certain joint mission efforts persisted in Africa as well, indicating the persistence of a shared evangelical agenda despite racial separation.¹⁵⁸ In the words of scholar Gregory Wills, while black Baptists always “rejected slavery and the doctrine of racial inferiority...in ecclesiology and theology, they shared a broad consensus with white Baptists” throughout the nineteenth century. In emphasizing mission work, education, and church discipline, postwar black Baptists expressed “ideas and practices strikingly similar” to their white counterparts.¹⁵⁹

By 1879, white leaders seem to have become more willing to cooperate with black associations, albeit still on limited terms. On the motion of a committee chaired by E.W. Warren, the pastor of the Richmond’s First Baptist Church, the now essentially all-white General Association finally invited the black State Convention to exchange corresponding delegates in the interest of “cultivating more intimate relations with the colored Baptists of the State.” Citing Christ’s prayer that “his people should be one,” the committee asserted that black Baptists were “an important part of our Zion.”¹⁶⁰ As historian W. Harrison Daniel has argued, whites’ change of heart probably could happen at this point because the prospect of radical political and social reconstruction had ended,

¹⁵⁶ *Minutes of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1873*, 55.

¹⁵⁷ *Minutes of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1874*, 27. For more on the ministry of Walter H. Brooks, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp. 272-73.

¹⁵⁸ *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1874*, 11. According to Paul Harvey, “the racial separation of churches after the Civil War did not preclude intriguing parallels and interactions between white and black believers in belief and practice, sometimes at an institutional level, often in ways unacknowledged.” Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 257.

¹⁵⁹ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 83.

¹⁶⁰ *Minutes of the...Baptist General Association of Virginia...1879*, 23.

and because white Baptists now understood that, black believers, though operating separately, generally did not harbor hostility toward them.¹⁶¹ Perhaps some white Baptists sincerely had regretted the widening racial divide as well, as the reference to Christ's desire for unity suggests. Still, although black and white messengers were appointed to visit one another's meetings over the next few decades, more substantive interracial fellowship remained a rarity. The two groups had pursued parallel, but distinct, paths after the war, and they would continue to travel them.¹⁶²

While the segregation of the postwar Baptist associations provides insight into the values and actions of white and black denominational leaders, what occurred on the local level proved far more significant for the lives of ordinary evangelical freedmen and freedwomen. Each mixed-race Baptist congregation in the region generated its own story in the wake of emancipation. In some churches, whites initiated segregation, while in others, blacks made the first move to leave. At times, an entire black membership would separate at once; at others, small groups of black men and women chose to linger in white-dominated congregations well past Reconstruction. Some white leaders quickly washed their hands of black members, while others offered assistance in crafting new church constitutions and transferring property. Although racial division was the

¹⁶¹ Daniel, "Virginia Baptists and the Negro, 1865-1902," 358-59.

¹⁶² For helpful studies of national black Baptist associations in the late nineteenth century, including the collapse of the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention in 1879, the divisions among black Baptist organizations, and the formation of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., in 1895, see Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, 107-203, and Historical Records Survey of Virginia, *Negro Baptist Churches in Richmond*, ix-x, 1-11. Beth Barton Schweiger argues that postwar whites clung to a "romanticized" view of slave religion in which black congregations could not achieve progress on the level of white ones. Additionally, whites' pursuit of social "respectability" and their "long experience of segregated congregations," particularly in urban areas, "allowed them to see segregation as progress long before Jim Crow broke over the South." Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 113-16, 172.

prevailing trend, the steps that church bodies took in separating were by no means simple or uniform.¹⁶³

Because of the physical movement of people, especially blacks, that occurred during and after the war, many churches attempted to update their rosters. In a meeting at the end of 1865, for instance, Hopeful Baptist of Hanover County required its black members to “come forward and enroll their names in the church book”; those who failed to do so within a few months would forfeit their membership.¹⁶⁴ In studying its roll of black members, Emmaus, in New Kent County, learned that many were dead and others missing, and the church struck out these names to compose a new list.¹⁶⁵ At Enon Baptist, in Essex County on the Middle Peninsula, a white committee met with some of the black male members to determine who had “voluntarily left their homes for Northern ones” and who had died.¹⁶⁶

Churches not only sought to update their membership rolls but their governments as well. Concerned that “the relations between the whites and blacks had been totally changed by emancipation,” Enon’s leaders set up a meeting with the black members in the summer of 1866 to discuss their position in the church. Seeking to maintain the antebellum order, the leadership at Enon ruled that the “entire control and regulation” of

¹⁶³ As W. Harrison Daniel has aptly noted, “generalizations on the relations of Baptist congregations with their colored members are hazardous.” Daniel, “Virginia Baptists and the Negro, 1865-1902,” 350. Daniel does speculate that congregations with relatively stable wartime black memberships probably made more of an effort to retain black members after the war. Churches whose regions and membership rosters had been significantly disrupted by the war, however, would have had to reorganize. In adopting new policies, these churches may have taken that opportunity to oust the black members. Yet the experiences at the churches studied here, both in war-torn and more stable counties, were too varied to support Daniel’s theory.

¹⁶⁴ Hopeful Baptist Church Minute Book, 1855-1900, Dec. 29, 1865, Apr. 14, 1866, church rosters at back of minute book, VBHS.

¹⁶⁵ Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb, Apr., and May, 1867.

¹⁶⁶ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, 1820-1874, Dec. 1866, VBHS. See also Beaver Dam Baptist Church Minute Book, 1828-1894, Aug. 1865, VBHS; Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 13, 1865; Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, 1865-1889, Mar., Apr., May. 1866, VBHS; Beulah (Hermon) Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1866.

church affairs should still belong “exclusively” to the white men. The black members were required to decide within the month whether to remain or seek dismissal. Those who chose to stay would “occupy the same position” as they had before the war— sit in the same assigned seats, “behave...in an orderly manner,” and exercise “no voice” in the church except in regard to black members. While some of the black members had already left to join a new church at the village of Port Royal, a large number of the black members chose to remain and submit to these regulations. These black members asked the “favour” of being able to sing and pray at the conclusion of the meeting, which was granted them.¹⁶⁷

Congregations such as Black Creek in Southampton County and Beulah in King William County actually altered their constitutions after the war to specify that the government of their churches now lay exclusively in the hands of the “free *white* male members.”¹⁶⁸ At one meeting, members of Glebe Landing, located on the Middle Peninsula, praised the Baptist model of organization that ensured each member an equal voice—from the “humblest individual” to the “highest in social position.” Yet this church also resolved that its government would reside with the “white male communicants.”¹⁶⁹

Although they limited freedmen’s role in church business, some white leaders still solicited their financial contributions. In 1866, Upper King and Queen set up a general assessment to pay the church’s “necessary expenses”—one dollar for white men, seventy-

¹⁶⁷ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun., July, and Aug. 1866. See also Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 1867.

¹⁶⁸ Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, 1866-1889, Mar. 1866, VBHS; Beulah (Hermon) Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1866, emphasis added.

¹⁶⁹ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1866, Mar. 1867. As a further example of a church restricting the rights of black members, Berea Baptist ruled in 1869 that it was “inexpedient” to admit black testimony for or against whites in discipline cases “under existing circumstances.” Berea Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 1869.

five cents for black men, and twenty-five cents for white women—and instructed the black deacons to collect from the black men. The church did not appear to set an amount for black women to give, indicating the degree that this group was marginalized in church business.¹⁷⁰ Bruington thought it “injudicious” to assess dues from black members, considering the “unsettled condition of relations” with them. Likewise, Tucker’s Swamp cancelled a motion to assess all the black men in the church in 1868. Perhaps these church leaders questioned the fairness of placing additional financial burdens on freedmen or concluded that blacks would leave the congregation rather than pay, given that congregations in Virginia were increasingly separating along racial lines anyway.¹⁷¹

Only a handful of churches in the region attempted to implement the General Association’s recommendation regarding Sabbath schools for blacks. When Bruington considered the prospect—with the support of the black congregants—in the spring of 1866, a large group of white members opposed holding the school in the church building. Mrs. S.B. Haynes offered to allow the school to meet in her barn after the harvest, and around 170 black pupils signed up that August.¹⁷² The members of Beulah voted to establish a school in the church gallery on Sunday afternoons, and those from Upper King and Queen felt it “especially the duty” of churches to promote the moral and spiritual development of freedmen and –women, resolving to organize a Sunday school to do so.¹⁷³ In addition to hosting a black Sunday school, Mattaponi asked its black members to select a group of white men to preach to them and administer communion

¹⁷⁰ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 17 and Dec. 15, 1866. See also Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 1867; Beulah (Hermon) Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. and May 1866, Feb. 1867.

¹⁷¹ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 4 and May 2, 1868; Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 27 and Jun. 1868. See also Daniel, “Virginia Baptists and the Negro, 1865-1902,” 352.

¹⁷² Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, May 22, Jun. 2, Aug. 12, Sept. 1, 1866.

¹⁷³ Beulah (Hermon) Baptist Church Minute Book, May and Jul. 1866; Upper King and Queen Baptist Church, May 19, 1866.

and discipline, ensuring that this body remained “under the control” of whites. The black members then “invited” Joseph Hart, who had preached to Confederate soldiers during the war, to minister to them.¹⁷⁴

Overseeing moral discipline among black congregants continued to remain a concern for certain churches in the postwar years, but not nearly as many blacks came before church courts as in the previous decades—largely, no doubt, because many blacks had departed to join separate congregations. Bruington expelled Billy Ball in 1868 for possessing stolen bacon.¹⁷⁵ Around the same time, Mill Swamp charged Mary Ann White with dancing, but she was acquitted for lack of evidence. A black member named Cherry, on the other hand, was expelled from this church for fornication the following year. Upon the report of a black leader, William Allman was excluded from Colosse for intoxication, while Washington Forton was pardoned for the same offense after his confession.¹⁷⁶

The most prominent cause of discipline for blacks in the postwar period, however, was nonattendance, which often arose because members had moved out of the area. In November 1865, nine former slaves and one free black man were expelled from Tucker’s Swamp in Southampton County for “moving from the county and not letting [the church] know.” A couple of weeks later, however, the church decided that all black members who had moved out of the area would be suspended, not expelled, until “they [could] be heard from.”¹⁷⁷ Troubled by the absence of many of its black members in 1867, Mill

¹⁷⁴ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Apr. 12 and Aug. 9, 1862, Jun. 11, 1864, Jul. 8, 1865, Dec. 9, 1865, Jan. 13, 1866.

¹⁷⁵ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, May 3, 1868.

¹⁷⁶ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 29, Jun. 6, and Sept. 5, 1868, Dec. 4, 1869; Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, May 9 and Jul. 1867, May 8, Jun. 12, Aug. 7, Sept. 11, 1869.

¹⁷⁷ Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. 26 and Dec. 9, 1865.

Swamp, in neighboring Isle of Wight County, appointed a committee of black men to exhort them to attend church meetings. When the committee itself did not attend the following meeting, the church moved to expel all black members who “absented themselves without sending any excuse or message.”¹⁷⁸ A year later, some of the excluded black men and women applied for letters of dismissal. The church informed them that “for total neglect of their church duties,” they would first need to apply for restoration. At least a dozen people agreed to follow this formal process and received proper letters to join other churches over the next few years.¹⁷⁹ Even as they prepared to separate from white-led bodies, many blacks proved willing to submit to established rules of Baptist government, presenting themselves before white councils.¹⁸⁰

Only one case involving the discipline of a white member for offenses against blacks appears in the church records studied, but that incident reveals much about the racial views of white Baptists during the period. In September 1866, a committee from Beulah Baptist charged Mrs. Ann Abrahams with acting cruelly toward her black servants. Although Abrahams insisted she was innocent and claimed that she had been “greatly slandered & abused by the public,” a church trial ensued in which a series of white members testified against her. Martha Landrum and Mary Fox stated that a black woman named Lucy had brought her daughter Martha to them one morning to “let some white person see how she had been scarred & burned by her mistress Mrs. Abrahams.” Upon examining the girl, Landrum and Fox found “such scars as [they] never saw

¹⁷⁸ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 31, Nov. 30, Dec. 25, 1867. See also Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 12, 1869, when the church ruled that black members were not permitted to miss more than three church meetings.

¹⁷⁹ Mill Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 5, 1868, Sept. 4, 1869, Dec. 3, 1870, Mar. 11, Dec. 2, 1871.

¹⁸⁰ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. and Sept. 1866, Mar. 9, 1867, Sept. 12, 1868; Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1866.

before”—running sores and burns on the victim’s shoulder blades, arm, and the back of her head. John Trant and Thomas Burress then testified that, when walking to Richmond the previous summer, they had encountered a black girl named Mary who told them that she had left her mistress, Mrs. Abrahams, because of brutal treatment. Showing them wounds on the back of her head, she said that Abrahams had often punished her with hot irons. Finally, a white member named Lucy Sale also stated that she had met a servant of Abrahams named Mary who had exhibited similar marks of injury on her head and back.¹⁸¹

After a discussion of this testimony, a white member moved that the church exclude Ann Abrahams from fellowship. Nine people voted to exclude her, including three men from the committee that had originally investigated the case.¹⁸² Thirteen members voted to retain her, however, and about twenty others present did not vote either way. Since the white witnesses could not prove that the gruesome injuries had come by Abrahams’s hand, it was essentially her word against that of two black girls. While the church had at least acknowledged the immorality of white-on-black violence, and while some white members were willing to take the part of the black victims, the majority refused to act. Perhaps these whites did not see enough evidence to convict Abrahams, or perhaps their judgment was racially motivated. Most likely it was a mixture of the two. When the black members of Beulah left the church during the next several years, they

¹⁸¹ Beulah (Hermon) Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1866. Although the church minutes do not indicate Lucy Sale’s race, a forty-year-old white woman of that name is listed in the U.S. Federal Census of 1860, King William County. The U.S. Federal Census of 1880, King and Queen County, however, does list a 28-year-old black woman named Lucy Blake, daughter of Robert Sale; she would have been around fourteen at the time of the Abrahams case at Beulah. Since the church minutes identify the member as “Mrs. Lucy Sale,” however, it seems certain that the older, white Lucy Sale was the woman in question.

¹⁸² One of the committee members was Robert S. Ryland, but it does not appear that he was related to Rev. Robert Ryland of Richmond. Woodford B. Hackley, *Faces on the Wall: Brief Sketches of the Men and Women whose Portraits and Busts were on the campus of the University of Richmond in 1955* (Virginia Baptist Historical Society, [Richmond, 1972?]), 90.

likely carried with them the memory of this case and its outcome. To be expected to have fellowship with a woman such as Ann Abrahams—or with those who wanted to keep her in the church—was probably more than some could ultimately bear.¹⁸³

Despite whites' efforts to supervise the religious instruction and discipline of blacks, Virginia's Baptist congregations were splitting along racial lines, and little by little, whites were ceding the government of the freedpeople to black leaders. Men such as Jesse Dungee of Colosse Baptist continued to oversee the discipline of the black members as before the war. Late in 1865, Dungee even helped investigate the conduct of Lambeth Page and several other Pamunkey Indian members of the congregation who were caught whipping black member John Holms "maliciously and against the rules" of the church. These men confessed and received the church's pardon. It is unclear whether Holms had been a slave to one of these men, but perhaps that was why they chose to abuse him. What is evident is that Colosse on at least one occasion was willing to punish members (albeit not white ones) for violence toward freedmen even though Baptists had only rarely disciplined masters for abusing enslaved people.¹⁸⁴

With the legal prohibitions removed, some churches that still had biracial congregations during the early postwar years began licensing black men to preach, exhort, baptize, and perform marriages for the black portions of their congregations.

¹⁸³ Beulah (Hermon) Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1866. See Dover Baptist Association minutes in the late 1860s and early 1870s for statistics on the complete departure of the black members from Beulah Baptist Church. See also Mary Burnley Gwathmey, *Beulah Baptist Church, King William County, Virginia: Highlights and Shadows, 1812-1862* (n.p., 1962), 56-57, 79-84. Gwathmey's history cites the appointment of a black deacon, George Harrison, by Beulah in 1868.

¹⁸⁴ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. and Dec. 1865. See May, Sept. 1865, Jan. 12, Mar. 9, 1867, Apr. 11, May 9, 1868 for other examples of Dungee's involvement in discipline cases. See U.S. Federal Census of 1870, King William County, for a record of Silas Miles, Pleasant Bradby, William Cook, Delaware Bradby, and Edward Bradby. It is assumed that John Holms was black, as he was not found listed with these men in the Indian community in the census, but does appear as a black man in the U.S. Federal Census of 1880, King William County.

These actions demonstrated a desire both to equip freedpeople properly for the ministry and, in some cases, to facilitate racial separation. Some whites, however, were still reluctant for blacks to form separate churches, and they envisioned that black leaders would continue to shepherd black members within their existing congregations.

Whatever combination of factors motivated these white Baptists, their readiness to grant licenses to black preachers after the war lends further support to the idea that many of them may not have supported the antebellum legal barriers in the first place.

Colosse licensed Dungee to preach in 1867 and appointed three black members to serve as deacons.¹⁸⁵ Likewise, South Quay and Emmaus licensed preachers Joseph Gregory and Harvey Patterson.¹⁸⁶ Enon decided to select one black member to preach and baptize, and, after hearing Henry Young deliver an exhortation, they licensed him. William Reynolds, Henry Jackson, and Lewis Jones were also permitted to preach and exhort at black meetings, and a group of black men was appointed to ensure that unauthorized preaching did not occur at these gatherings. Several months later, the church entrusted this whole group of leaders with hearing the “experiences” of all black baptismal candidates.¹⁸⁷ When Walker Howard and Ruffin Hoomes applied to Upper King and Queen for licenses to preach, however, the white leaders did not grant their request, and instead ruled that the black members should first separate from the white-led church to avoid such “perplexing and embarrassing questions.”¹⁸⁸ Other churches still attempted to maintain a connection with blacks and regulate their meetings; Bruington

¹⁸⁵ George Washington, Fendal Butler, and James Collins were appointed as deacons. Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 9, 1867.

¹⁸⁶ South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, 1827-1899, Sept. 1866, VBHS; Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1867.

¹⁸⁷ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1866 and Jun. 1867. Other black leaders included Isaac Temple, London Taylor, and John Satterwhite.

¹⁸⁸ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 14 and Oct. 19, 1867.

and Colosse reminded their members in the late 1860s that blacks could not preach or hold meetings without receiving proper licenses.¹⁸⁹

Of utmost importance to black leaders was the ability to perform marriages, as demand for them after the war ran high among blacks whose marriages the law of slavery had not recognized.¹⁹⁰ Bruington granted Kingston Roy a “certificate” to present to the King and Queen County Court in the hope that he could obtain permission to administer the rites of matrimony.¹⁹¹ Likewise, Enon authorized Henry Young to solemnize marriages, provided the courts of Caroline or Essex Counties licensed him.¹⁹² Beverly Sparks received a similar certificate from Mattaponi Church, deeming him “suitable” to perform the ceremony.¹⁹³

When congregations in the region split along racial lines, it was sometimes the white members who initiated the separation. As one of the earliest examples of a postwar split, Mount Olivet dismissed all its black members at one time in December of 1865, declaring them “discharged from all their obligations to the church” and “left free to act for themselves.” Such a decree could have been a response to the black members’ desire to separate, but the minutes do not discuss their involvement.¹⁹⁴ This rural body, located north of Richmond in war-torn Hanover County, had contained a fairly even ratio of whites to blacks before the war.

¹⁸⁹ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, May 3, 1868; Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 12, 1869.

¹⁹⁰ For more on the postwar marriages of ex-slaves, see Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery & Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 413-31.

¹⁹¹ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 2, 1867.

¹⁹² Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 1867.

¹⁹³ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 14, 1867. See also Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 17, 1867.

¹⁹⁴ Mount Olivet Baptist Church Minute Bok, Dec. 3, 1865.

Several months later, whites at Mattaponi Church in King and Queen County decided it “best for the [black members] as well as ourselves” that the freedmen and – women, who were already meeting separately, organize their own church. When a committee went to inform the black members of this ruling, the blacks unanimously agreed.¹⁹⁵ Yet while most of the black congregants sought letters of dismissal right away, a sizable contingent remained for the next few years. Finally, in 1869, Mattaponi urged these people to join the newly formed black congregation of Zion Church, and this group of about thirty-five people accepted letters of dismissal. Among those who had lingered at Mattaponi was George Lee, formerly a deacon, and other men and women, such as members of the Lockley family, who had been free before the war. Perhaps their relatively elevated status had fostered some affinity between them and their white counterparts that they were slow to relinquish.¹⁹⁶

As mentioned above, Upper King and Queen voted in 1867 to dismiss all its black members rather than license two black men to preach. After dismissing the blacks en masse from membership in the congregation, the whites then went a step further and “suspended” fellowship with these people until they could be sure that the freedmen’s “sentiments & practices” were in line with scripture. This seemingly harsh ruling ironically also implied that these whites still viewed Christian fellowship with black brethren as an important issue, even after a church separation took place. The question remains whether such fellowship was meant in the purely philosophical sense that simply viewed the black people as partakers in the same faith, or actually implied periodic

¹⁹⁵ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, May 11 and Jul. 7, 1866.

¹⁹⁶ Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 7 and Oct. 9, 1869. For George Lee’s appointment as a deacon, see Mattaponi Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 11, 1841. See also U.S. Federal Census of 1850, King and Queen County, for George Lee, a 35-year-old free black farmer.

personal interactions with the members of the black church. In any event, the white leaders at Upper King and Queen insisted that they harbored no “unkind feelings” toward the black members and were “sincerely desirous for their spiritual & temporal welfare.” Over the next couple of years, these whites maintained communication with the First Colored Baptist Church of Upper King and Queen and assisted this body in preparing its covenant and constitution.¹⁹⁷ While most of Upper King and Queen’s black members left to join the new church, Corbin and Isabella Tunstall applied for and received membership at Bruington, still a mixed-race body in 1868, after leaving Upper King and Queen. Perhaps the Tunstalls and Bruington were hoping to maintain some form of cross-racial connection.¹⁹⁸ While interracial Baptist ties were disintegrating in the postwar period—Upper King and Queen had essentially ousted all the black people from membership—they apparently stretched far enough for a white congregation to help a black one get on its feet and for a black couple to pursue fellowship in a mixed-race body.

When those black members who had chosen to remain at Enon Baptist in 1866 allegedly did not fulfill their agreement with whites to “behave...in an orderly manner,” the church voted to dismiss all of them, except for one black woman, in 1870. Six black people were received into the church two years later, and the church rosters continued to list seven black members well into the 1870s.¹⁹⁹ Several churches in the region also included groups of black members in their annual reports to the Dover Association throughout that decade. The Portsmouth Association recorded fewer black members than

¹⁹⁷ Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 19, 1867, Oct. 16 and Nov. 20, 1869, Jan. 15 and Feb. 19, 1870. See also Daniel, “Virginia Baptists and the Negro, 1865-1902,” 354-56.

¹⁹⁸ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 21, 1868.

¹⁹⁹ Enon Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1870, Apr. 1872, church rosters at back of book. For other examples of white-initiated separations, see Berea Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1866 and Sept. 1869 (Hanover County); Hopeful Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 3, 1870 (Hanover County); Tucker’s Swamp Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 11, 1870 (Southampton County).

Dover, but six black people still remained on that association's roster in 1879.²⁰⁰ One wonders what might have motivated these enclaves of people to continue attending church with whites, and what encouraged the whites to accept them. Perhaps some of them in fact drifted away and the churches never got around to removing them from their rolls, but strong personal bonds may also have existed.

Three black women—Mary Washington, Betty Lewis, and Jinny Griffin—chose to stay at Glebe Landing after the rest of its black membership withdrew. Mary Washington was later excluded for “certain charges” that the clerk did not specify. A note next to Betty Lewis's name in the roster—“at Dr. Gatewoods”—indicates that she may have been a servant of one of the congregation's members. Jinny Griffin, whom the clerk still identified as “Sister,” received regular financial assistance from the church treasury in the early 1870s—a fact that may account in part for her decision to remain a member. Glebe Landing took up this impoverished woman's case at the same time that it earmarked money for John Gardner, a disabled white member.²⁰¹ Despite the vast migration of blacks out of white-led congregations, it seems that remnants of cross-racial fellowship remained long after the war and emancipation.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ At the Dover Association's 1879 session, Colosse reported 19 blacks out of a total of 153 members; Emmaus (New Kent) reported 12 blacks out of 101 members; Hebron reported 5 blacks out of 86 members; James City reported 4 blacks out of 51 members; Taylorsville reported 1 black person out of 103 members; Williamsburg reported 21 blacks out of 118 members. *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1879*, 16. At the Portsmouth Association's 1879 session, Antioch reported 1 black person out of 101 members, Beaver Dam reported 2 blacks out of 272 members, Black Creek reported 2 blacks out of 245 members, and Sappony reported 1 black person out of 61 members. *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1879*, 23.

²⁰¹ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Nov. and Dec. 1869, Mar. and Nov. 1870, May 1871, list of black female members at back of minute book.

²⁰² For an important discussion of the theological reasons why some blacks may have chosen to remain in white-led churches, and why some blacks continued to cooperate with whites in the areas of missions and education, see Irons, “Two Great Divisions of the Same Army,” in *Apocalypse and the Millennium*, forthcoming. Irons argues that that the “millennial vision” of some black evangelicals, who felt a “special calling to teach their white coreligionists to embrace human equality and to build a more just church

While whites led the segregation of some congregations, the process was a cooperative one in other congregations. White leaders at these churches appointed committees during the postwar years to confer with the black members, who were often gathering separately anyway by this point. Shoulder's Hill had undergone a racial division during the war when blacks from the Sycamore Hill branch had split off against the wishes of the white leaders, as discussed above. The black members who worshipped at the Shoulder's Hill branch, by contrast, chose to remain connected with the white church during the war. In September 1865, after some white members objected to receiving any new black members into the church, the white leaders invited the blacks to attend a meeting and state whether they wished to continue in membership. According to the meeting records, these freedpeople expressed their disapproval of the self-separation initiated by the blacks at Sycamore Hill. While this group, too, desired to form a separate church, they wanted to do so in a "regular" fashion, with letters of dismission and assistance from the white pastor and deacons. The white leaders then formed a committee to help organize a black church, known as Union Baptist, as well as to sell the white-dominated congregation's current building to Union since Shoulder's Hill was preparing to construct a new one. At first, the whites voted not to part with the old building for less than \$1,000, but the black members were eventually able to negotiate a deal for two payments of \$450.²⁰³

polity," preserved interracial ties long after the war. In studying the postwar relations of white and black churchmen, Irons admits, "the local is far more vital than the global."

²⁰³ Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1845-1869, Jul., Sept., Oct. 1865, Jan., Apr., Aug. 1866, Oct. 1867, Apr., Jul., Aug. 1869; Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Book, 1783-1907, Jan., Apr., Jul. 1866. For some reason, the 1783-1907 minute book—which usually contains identical or similar records as the 1845-1869 book—states that the black congregation agreed to purchase the meeting house for \$1,000. See also *Minutes of the... Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia... 1866*, "Record of the Churches," for a listing of Union Baptist Church, Nansemond County, with a total membership of 160.

When whites at Smithfield Baptist purchased a new meeting house in 1874, they agreed to “dispose of the Old Church property to the Baptist Col’d people.” It is unclear whether the property was donated or sold to the black members, but the minutes do not record that any money changed hands. This now all-white church, which had had a large black majority before the war, contained only a few dozen members by this point. The black people apparently had separated, but enough of a connection remained between the congregations to warrant the transfer of church property.²⁰⁴

In King and Queen County, white committees at Bruington met with blacks on three occasions in 1866 to solicit “a free expression of their views and wishes” on the possibility of separation. The black members voted unanimously to remain for the time being, agreeing to continue under the “control and discipline” of the leadership. They did express a desire, however, for a separate meeting house, as well as for a white committee to “superintend their discipline.”²⁰⁵ The black membership continued to expand over the next few years; in 1869, the minutes noted a net gain of forty-nine blacks, even though these could presumably have chosen to join all-black congregations. The same period saw a net loss of three whites from the church.²⁰⁶ One black man entered the biracial congregation on the good report of “several of the most prominent colored members” at Bruington, and a certain black woman found fellowship at Bruington after proving her

²⁰⁴ Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1894, Sept. 13, 1874, VBHS. Smithfield contained 13 whites and 123 blacks in 1860. *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... 1860*, 17. By 1873, the church reported 32 whites and no blacks. *Minutes of the... Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association... [1873]*, 20.

²⁰⁵ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1, Oct. 6, Nov. 2, 1866, Feb. 2, 1867. For other examples of whites and blacks dialoguing toward a separation, see Emmaus Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb., Apr., May, and Sept., 1867, Jul. and Aug. 1868, Sept. 1870; South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. and Jul., 1867, Jun. and Jul., 1868.

²⁰⁶ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1900, 1869 roster, preceding December 1869 records, VBHS.

“correct Christian conduct.” Bruington thus held out as an interracial congregation long after other churches had begun to divide.²⁰⁷

The white leadership at Bruington took significant interest in the spiritual status of their black brethren. In 1869, Pastor R. H. Bagby contributed an article about Bruington’s black members to the *Religious Herald*, describing how he held “special meetings” for them and how he delighted in baptizing and having fellowship with black converts in the years after the war. Bagby contended that whites and blacks were “all equally susceptible of religious improvement,” and, believing it white Christians’ “imperative duty” to provide religious education to blacks, he began a class at the church to train black leaders for the ministry.²⁰⁸

Observing a decline in black members’ attendance at the end of 1869, Bruington sent a committee to inform the black deacons that it “would be gratified” to have the black congregants “attend these services regularly and habitually.” Their continued absences would indicate a “want of sympathy and fellowship” for which the church would need to administer discipline.²⁰⁹ At least some of the black members responded a few months later by applying for letters of dismission to form a separate church.

Bruington set up a committee to “aid in and superintend the constitution and organization” of this body to ensure its adoption of Baptist doctrine and practice.²¹⁰

White and black leaders from Bruington worked together in establishing New Mount

²⁰⁷ New member Robert Roane came from a church in Caroline County that “was supposed to have disbanded,” and Mary Williams had been forced to leave Mangohic church after its colored membership had been “severed” from that congregation. Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, May 16, Jun. 20, 1869. See p. 357 of this chapter, above, for an earlier case at Bruington concerning Corbin and Isabella Tunstall. Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1900, Jun. 21, 1868.

²⁰⁸ R.H. Bagby, “The Colored People,” *Religious Herald*, Feb. 18, 1869, cited in Whitt, “Free Indeed!” 2961-63.

²⁰⁹ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 4, 1869.

²¹⁰ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 20, 1870.

Zion church over the next several months. Concerned that some of the new congregation's leaders were not ordained ministers, but rather "strangers from the City of Richmond," a joint committee consisting both of whites and of blacks who had chosen to remain members of Bruington met with representatives from New Mount Zion until they were satisfied that the church was "regularly organized" with proper leadership.²¹¹

The following year, a second group of blacks requested letters to separate from Bruington. Once again, a committee was appointed to assist them in constituting another new church, known as Bethlehem Baptist. At this point, a number of black people remained on the roster at Bruington, but they "rarely, if ever, attended" services; many of these people apparently had moved away from the area. The white congregation voted to remove the names of these non-attenders within six months unless they came forward to say otherwise. Bruington fully cut the ties with its black membership a few months later, when it decided not to require those blacks who had been excluded earlier to apply to the white members for restoration before transferring their membership to the black churches. Bruington instead authorized the black leaders of New Mount Zion and Bethlehem to "consider for themselves" in such cases.²¹² By July of 1872, every black member had been dismissed or dropped from Bruington's rolls, except for Ginney Kaufman, who approached the white congregation and "expressed a desire still to remain" at church with them. Kaufman continued in fellowship at Bruington until her death, noted specifically by the clerk as the "only colored member," in 1874.²¹³

Nearby in King William County, whites at Colosse met with black members as well as members from the local community of Pamunkey Indians, known as "Indian

²¹¹ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 26, Oct. 16, Nov. 20, Dec. 31, 1870.

²¹² Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 5, Dec. 2, 1871, Apr. 28, 1872.

²¹³ Bruington Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 6, 1872, Apr. 26, 1874.

Town,” to decide the standing of those groups in the congregation. Acting as a messenger from Indian Town in June 1866, Thomas Langston requested Colosse’s advice in forming a separate church for the Indian members. Two months later, Colosse granted letters of dismissal to these people, who formed the Pamunkey Indian Baptist Church—the first Indian Baptist church in the state.²¹⁴

A number of black people remained affiliated with Colosse for the next few years, however, during which time Jesse Dungee received his preaching license and other blacks joined the diaconate to supervise the black membership as before the war. The minutes do not indicate whether the black congregants were worshipping separately from whites at this time, but it seems likely, considering they had done so before the war and that Dungee was now authorized to preach to them.²¹⁵ White leaders made a point of requiring the black male members’ presence at church business meetings, threatening to discipline those who missed three or more such gatherings. That regulation indicated the continued desire of whites at Colosse to remain connected with their black brethren.²¹⁶

A committee of whites from Colosse met in the spring of 1869 to discuss the “best means to govern for the spiritual welfare” of the black members. The committee laid out a list of regulations, including the measure regarding black attendance at church meetings. The main focus of the list, however, was a reiteration of the church rule that black leaders who sought to preach and lead worship for black members must first apply to the church for licenses. Whites were still attempting to keep a watchful eye on blacks

²¹⁴ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. and Aug. 1866; see also Aug. 1859. For more on the Pamunkey and Mattaponi Indians of eastern Virginia, see Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas’s People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), especially pp. 200-02 for information on the Colosse and Pamunkey Indian Baptist Churches.

²¹⁵ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 1859, Mar. 9, 1867, Apr. 11 and May 9, 1868; Mar. 13, Apr. 10, May 8, 1869.

²¹⁶ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 12, 1869.

in the congregation while simultaneously commissioning black men for leadership.²¹⁷

That May, ten black men and fourteen black women came forward to receive baptism and were added to the existing roster of black members, revealing that some blacks in the community still desired membership in a mixed-race body—at least for the time being—and that whites at Colosse were willing to accept them. More than a dozen blacks remained on Colosse's rolls throughout the next decade. For the most part, however, blacks at Colosse wanted their own church. Over the next several months, different groups of black members, including Jesse Dungee and his family, expressed their readiness to separate from the white congregation and began requesting letters of dismissal to join Bethany Baptist Church, also in King William County, or other area black congregations.²¹⁸

While the split at Colosse Baptist took place through the efforts of both white and black leaders and occurred over a number of years, in other congregations, black members seem to have left entirely on their own initiative. White leaders at Bethlehem Baptist in Hanover County attempted to set up meetings with black deacons in 1866, but to no avail. Considering that the black members had “entirely absented themselves from public worship since the fall of Richmond,” and that they allegedly showed “no interest or sympathy in common with our body, as well as great disrespect,” the white leaders revoked their membership but authorized the clerk to grant letters of dismissal should anyone apply.²¹⁹ After blacks at Walnut Grove, also in Hanover County, applied for admission into the Shiloh Baptist Association and expressed a “desire to dissolve their

²¹⁷ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 13 and Jun. 12, 1869.

²¹⁸ Colosse Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 11, Oct. 9, Dec. 12, 1869, Feb. 12, Mar. 12, Apr. 9, May 7, 1870; rosters of black members interspersed between meeting minutes. See Dover Baptist Association minutes throughout the 1870s for membership statistics.

²¹⁹ Bethlehem Baptist Church Minute Book, 1854-1875, Mar., Apr., May 1866, VBHS.

formal connexion” with the church, they were dismissed as a group. Walnut Grove permitted them to continue using the building for three months—under the supervision of the white deacons—by which time they were expected to construct their own meeting house.²²⁰

Upon separating from North West Baptist in 1866, a group of blacks in Norfolk County formed Bethel Baptist with the assistance of an “ecclesiastical council” of local black elders and deacons, including the distinguished preacher Lewis Tucker. Called to deliver the church’s first sermon, Tucker selected the fourth chapter of Ephesians on the theme of “Christian unity,” the irony of which may have been apparent to this newly separated, racially defined fledgling congregation.²²¹

In Southampton County, Henry Bowers received a letter of dismission from Black Creek in 1866 so that he could help organize a church at Franklin Depot. Black Creek also decided that, if the proposed church were not organized, Bowers would need to return his letter and remain a member of Black Creek Church.²²² Word of Bowers’s new church apparently got around; the following year a group of black men and women requested letters of dismission from Beaver Dam Church in Isle of Wight County in order to join the body at Franklin Depot.²²³ In addition to granting letters to these people, Beaver Dam also expelled a large group of members for leaving the area without informing the church. Among these people was Jack Butler, who reapplied for membership a few years later; after “presenting a certificate of his exemplary Christian

²²⁰ Walnut Grove Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 7, 1866.

²²¹ North West Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 1, 1866; Tucker Family and Church Record Book, “Bethel Baptist Church, Norfolk County, Va.” Paul entreats the Ephesians to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” Eph. 4:1-3 (King James Version).

²²² Black Creek Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1866, Sept. 1867, Sept. 1870, Mar. 1871.

²²³ Beaver Dam Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1867. At least one black member of South Quay Baptist also left to join the church at Franklin. South Quay Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1867.

character,” he was restored but then granted a proper letter of dismissal.²²⁴ Most of the black members at Glebe Landing were apparently uninterested in pursuing the standard course of dismissal; the church revoked the memberships of nearly all its black congregants in 1867 for withdrawing “in a manner wholly inconsistent with the well-established principles of gospel order.”²²⁵

In contrast to the events at Glebe Landing, a more amicable separation than the one at Fairfields Baptist, in Northumberland County on the Northern Neck, could hardly be found. Noting after the war that most of its black members had “left their homes and [had gone] beyond the bounds of the church,” Fairfields still included around sixty blacks who attended “their church regular”—indicating that they were already meeting separately but remained connected with the white church.²²⁶ Writing to request dismissions for these people in 1867, black leaders Hiram Kenner and Samuel Conway composed a remarkable letter to Fairfields expressing their “desire to act in all things with an eye single to the glory of God and for the unity of that common faith which constitutes us one in Christ Jesus.” Still seeing their white fellow members as “dear brethren in bonds of Christ” and hoping to “preserve that peace and harmony which ought to characterize those of the same faith and order,” Kenner and Conway nevertheless felt that a separate church would best ensure the “mutual good” of whites and blacks and provide for the needs of black portion of the congregation—an ordained

²²⁴ Beaver Dam Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 1867, Sept. 1868, Jun. 1871.

²²⁵ Glebe Landing Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug., Oct., Nov. 1867. For other examples of separations initiated by blacks, see Coan (formerly Wicomoco) Baptist Church Minute Book, Dec. 2, 1865, Nov. 3, 1866 (Northumberland County); Providence Baptist Church Minute Book, Mar. 31, 1867 (Caroline County).

²²⁶ Fairfields Baptist Church Minute Book, letter to the Rappahannock Association after Jun. 1866 minute. For the approximate total of sixty remaining black members, see requests for letters of dismission by thirty-eight black members in Aug. 1867 and twenty-two in Sept. 1867. Fairfields Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 10 and Sept. 7, 1867.

ministry, regular church meetings, and a Sabbath school. If whites were not willing or able to grant these requests to the black members, the black leaders simply requested their “parting benediction and blessing” and an endorsement of their “Christian character and standing.” The white members at Fairfields apparently chose the latter route, and one of the white deacons donated a parcel of land to the newly constituted black congregation of Shiloh Baptist.²²⁷

While most churches in the area attempted to keep track of their black members after the war and to institute some kind of formal separation, whether through dismissions or exclusions, a small number of churches seem to have neglected formal processes altogether. The records of Antioch Baptist of Sussex County and of Suffolk Baptist, churches with sizable and active antebellum black memberships, make few references to black members after the war. Perhaps this indicates that the black congregants had all but broken away from these bodies before that point, or that the white leaders had little regard for what the freedmen and –women chose to do. What remains clear is that, by the late 1860s, the vast majority of southern black Baptists had chosen to strike out from white-led churches in order to organize their own congregations.²²⁸ The number of blacks in the Dover Association dropped from almost 14,000 in 1860 to just over 400 in 1870. The Portsmouth Association faced an even more drastic decline as approximately 90 percent of its black membership withdrew in that decade.²²⁹ Meeting houses and

²²⁷ Fairfields Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 10, 1867, letter from Hiram Kenner and Samuel Conway to Fairfields Baptist Church, Jul. 7, 1867. See also C. Horace Hamilton and John M. Ellison, *The Negro Church in Rural Virginia of Virginia Polytechnic Institute: Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, Blacksburg, Virginia* Bulletin 273 (Jun. 1930), 12.

²²⁸ Antioch (Raccoon Swamp) Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 13, 1870, Aug. 12, 1872 (only mention of black members aside from Aug. 8, 1874, discussed below); Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Book, 1866-1875.

²²⁹ In 1860, there were 13,882 blacks and 5,456 whites in the Dover Association; by 1870, there were only 401 blacks and 5,934 whites. *Minutes of the...Dover Baptist Association...1860*, 28; *Minutes of*

worship hours that had once brought the races together as no other activity in Old Virginia now embodied one of the earliest and most dramatic forms of segregation in the New South.

At the same time new black churches were being founded—particularly in rural areas—by blacks who left biracial congregations, the large Afro-Baptist churches that had been organized before the war welcomed many new members as well. Often one of the early postwar acts of these congregations' black leaders was to secure legal title to their church's property. In January 1866, for instance, the white trustees of First African of Richmond formally surrendered the church deed to a group of black trustees.²³⁰ After requesting that its white trustees resign, Ebenezer Baptist, also in Richmond, hired a lawyer to write a new deed for its property containing the names of four black trustees. Because a fifth trustee of mixed race, member E.S. Gentry, was sometimes "recognized as a white man," the lawyer recommended that the church elect another black man to replace him, and C.H. Figgins took the post.²³¹ Black Baptists proved eager to own and maintain their church property; in 1871, the Shiloh Association created a Church Edifice

the...Dover Baptist Association...1870, 17. The Portsmouth Association included 4,338 blacks and 5,093 whites in 1860 and 46 blacks and 4,478 whites by 1870, *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1860*, insert; *Minutes of the...Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association...1870*, Statistical Table. Kenneth Bailey notes that no black churches remained a part of regional Southern Baptist associations after about 1872. Bailey, "Post-Civil War Racial Separations, 470. As Leonard Curry has discussed, "blacks and whites in some congregations groped uncomfortably and hesitantly, but without recrimination, toward a solution to a dimly perceived problem and eventually separated to the relief and satisfaction of both elements with evidence of considerable goodwill and a modicum of mutual respect." Curry, *Free Black in Urban America*, 175.

²³⁰ First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, transcript of deed transfer at the back of first minute book, 1841-1859; the next minute book does not commence until 1875. Two of the trustees included Benjamin Harris and Joseph Anderson, black deacons during the antebellum years; for their appointments as deacons, see Oct. 17, 1852 and Nov. 14, 1855.

²³¹ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 17 and Nov. 13, 1865 and Feb. 12, 1866. For a more detailed discussion of negotiations between blacks and whites over church properties in Richmond, see O'Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 273-75. For a record of Gillfield's trustees, see Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Aug. 1 and 15, Dec. 19, 1870, Jan. 16, 1871.

Fund to lend money to congregations for building or repairing their meeting houses. Shiloh requested that its delegates solicit ten cents per year for this fund from each of their members.²³²

Of even higher priority for black Baptists than acquiring property and buying or erecting buildings was the organization or re-organization of church governments. As before the war, black deacon boards held significant power in directing church business; congregations drew on the talents of people who had served as leaders before emancipation even as they added new faces to the diaconate. A couple of months after electing Peter Randolph as pastor in 1865, Ebenezer selected a group of twelve deacons, more than half of whom previously had filled the office.²³³ Since its early history, Gillfield had appointed female deacons as well as males; Eliza Scott, for instance, had joined the diaconate at Gillfield in 1857 and continued to play a role in church government during the Reconstruction years.²³⁴ In the postwar period, the deaconesses frequently cited female members for fornication and illegitimate births.²³⁵

Under the Baptist system of congregational governance, laypeople held considerable influence. While pastors performed baptisms, administered communion, directed worship services, and chaired business meetings, the congregations still exercised some degree of authority over their leaders, prominently including the power to

²³² *Minutes of the...Shiloh Colored Baptist Association...1871*, 10.

²³³ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 25 and Jul. 17, 1865. For previous deacon elections, see Jul. 25, 1858, Oct. 21, 1860 Feb. 10, 1861, Jan. 25 and Dec. 27, 1863. At Gillfield, men such as William Jackson continued their service as deacons after the war while those such as Peter Archer transitioned from their roles as assistants to that of regular deacons. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, list of leaders, May 3, 1857; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, list of leaders at front of minute book.

²³⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1862, list of leaders, May 3, 1857; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, list of leaders at front of minute book.

²³⁵ Even those women at Gillfield who were not deaconesses took part in discipline cases, at least those of other women. Martha Winn objected to and temporarily blocked the restoration of Lucy Harris in 1869. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Feb. 1 and 15, 1869.

hire and dismiss a pastor—a circumstance that sometimes bred conflict. In 1866, members of First Baptist of Williamsburg elected John Dawson, an Oberlin-educated outsider, as their pastor, rather than appoint the church’s long-standing preacher, John Smith. Smith then requested a letter of dismissal, which the church refused to grant. Facing accusations that he had spoken disrespectfully to church leaders, Smith led a group of members out of the Williamsburg congregation to form the Rising Sun Baptist Church in York County. First Baptist chose to withdraw the “right hand of fellowship” from this body of believers.²³⁶

Just as their associations voiced concerns about the proper preparation of Baptist clergy, black churches proceeded carefully in ordaining ministers. Leaders at Gillfield, for example, took part in councils to consider the ordinations of various ministers for churches in Suffolk, Surry County, and as far away as Cumberland County in the heart of the Piedmont region. In 1869, Gillfield member Pompy Peniston served as a leader in the fledgling country church of Pleasant Grove in Prince George County. But when that church wished to have Peniston ordained the following year, Gillfield demurred, apparently concluding that either Peniston or Pleasant Grove was not ready to take such a step.²³⁷

Churches took care when issuing preaching licenses, requiring members who sought the “privilege” to apply to an “examining committee.”²³⁸ Diveid Thompson faced charges from Ebenezer Baptist in 1866 for “preaching without athoretay” and “preaching

²³⁶ First Baptist Church [Williamsburg, Virginia], *Minutes of the Congregational Meetings, 1865-1883*, Vol. I, 142, 144, 153, 155, 157-59, 161, 174-75, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 28-30; Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, 10; Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers*, 58.

²³⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jun. 2, 1868, Sept. 6 and 20, 1869, Jun. 6 and 20, July 18, 1870.

²³⁸ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 7, 1865, Oct. 8, 1866, Feb. 11, 1867.

fals Doctren,” but after an investigation he was exonerated.²³⁹ E.S. Gentry was authorized by Ebenezer to preach but not to administer the Lord’s Supper or conduct marriage ceremonies.²⁴⁰ In 1868, Gillfield noted that some of its members were “going out into the country” to preach without licenses. At least one of those men then admitted that he did not have the authority to lead meetings and asked for the church’s pardon. The church resolved to deal strictly with those caught preaching or leading worship without permission.²⁴¹

Ebenezer’s leaders also investigated questionable and even “disorderly” prayer meetings led by laypeople and called a council with other black churches in Richmond and Manchester in October 1866 to discuss the problem. The following summer, Ebenezer sent leaders to “examine” one gathering “sean [sic] to be [carried] on in theater Alley,” and reported the leader of another unsanctioned meeting to his own church, First African.²⁴² When Gillfield’s leaders learned that certain female members were holding worship meetings in their homes, they cited scripture in judging it “wrong for a woman to preach or exercise the position of a minister of the gospel at any time or at any place.”²⁴³

Black church leaders worried not only about unsanctioned meetings, but also about disorder in times of regular worship. When people began exiting services too early at Gillfield, the church voted to have the doors locked between the end of the sermon and

²³⁹ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 13 and Oct. 8, 1866.

²⁴⁰ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, May 13, 1867.

²⁴¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Aug. 3 and Sept. 7, 1868.

²⁴² Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 8, 1866, Jul. 8 and Aug. 13, 1867, Sept. 14, 1868.

Ebenezer did grant Nelson Turner and William Goughney permission to hold prayer meetings in a couple of Richmond neighborhoods. Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Jul. 13, 1868. Gillfield’s deacons also expressed concern about “unbecoming” all-night prayer meetings held at the church on Christmas Eve; the church voted not to open the church until 5 a.m. on Christmas morning. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Dec. 20, 1869.

²⁴³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Sept. 7, 1868.

the end of the benediction.²⁴⁴ A few months later, Pastor Williams complained that disorder around the church door and yard following Sunday night meetings hindered people from getting out onto the street. Church leaders actually wrote to the mayor to see whether a law existed to prevent this practice. The mayor responded by offering to grant “police powers” to two elected individuals in the congregation. These men would have authority to arrest those who did not obey them; perpetrators would face not only church law but fines and imprisonment from the secular courts.²⁴⁵ As before the war, black Baptists generally took care to cultivate a positive reputation in a racially hostile society, and keeping order among those who gathered in the church yard was surely aimed in part at maintaining a respectable profile in the city.

In their attempts to promote order in during services, Gillfield’s pastor and deacons convened a church meeting on the subject in 1870 at which they cited the apostle Paul’s exhortations to the Corinthians regarding proper conduct at times of worship.²⁴⁶ Deacon Peter Archer expressed concerns about “certain members squelling [sic] and making a noise so that the minister cannot be heard.” The church voted not to tolerate the “hypocrisy” of members who acted as if they were wholeheartedly engaged “in the spirit” but were caught “eating candy or laughing and whispering” during the service.²⁴⁷

A long-standing tradition in some Christian congregations required separate seating of males and females during church services. When member C.B. Stevens

²⁴⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jul. 20, 1868. See also Jun. 19, 1871. For a similar discussion between the congregation, deacons, and pastor Ryland of First African in Richmond before the war, see First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, May 6, Jun. 3, Nov. 18, 1849; Feb. 3, 1850.

²⁴⁵ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Oct. 5 and Nov. 16, 1868. The church appointed Adolphus Monroe and Richard Shelly to the position. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Dec. 7 and 21, 1868.

²⁴⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Oct. 3, 1870. For scripture reference on order in worship, see 1 Cor. 14:40.

²⁴⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Sept. 19 and Oct. 3, 1870.

proposed that abolishing Gillfield's rule of gender segregation would promote "better order," the church voted to uphold the division.²⁴⁸ Ebenezer, on the other hand, voted that when a gentleman accompanied a lady to church, they could sit together. In the same breath, the church also requested that "no gentleman will chue tobacco whilte in the House of God," perhaps implying a suggestion that men should mind their manners around the ladies.²⁴⁹

Just as postwar black Baptist churches maintained high standards for leadership, preaching, and worship, they took care in admitting new members. As in the antebellum churches, applicants were required to describe their experience of faith and repentance before the congregation, generally at regularly scheduled business meetings.²⁵⁰ When large numbers of applicants showed up, as when seventy-six people applied for baptism at Gillfield on the night of March 7, 1870, members decided to stay as long as it took to hear these people. They remained in session well past 11 o'clock to hear candidates at the next few meetings as well.²⁵¹

With emancipation came large-scale migrations, as former slaves embraced their freedom by searching for family members, obtaining property, and starting new lives in other areas. Gillfield both received and dismissed people who chose to migrate. Emmanuel Tyler, for instance, requested and received a letter of dismissal from Gillfield in 1871, which allowed him to join whatever church he saw fit.²⁵² As a slave, he had been absent from the church for twenty years because his owners had moved away,

²⁴⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Nov. 2, 1868.

²⁴⁹ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 20, 1868.

²⁵⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Oct. 18, 1869.

²⁵¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Mar. 7, 14, 21, Apr. 6, 1870. See also July 25 and Aug. 1, 1870, when the church finally ruled not to hold meetings past 11:00 p.m.

²⁵² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jan. 16, 1871.

leaving him no opportunity to obtain a proper dismissal. Applicants would frequently arrive from other churches in the region, and, as Ebenezer had done during the war, Gillfield took these people under “watch care”—a form of provisional membership—until their former churches could send their letters of recommendation.²⁵³ Pastor Williams also brought up the fact that many of Gillfield’s members had moved north without letters “in the Regular Baptist Way.” The congregation decided to write to northern churches to request the names of those who had come from Gillfield without letters of dismissal.²⁵⁴ Thus while black churches sought order in their governments and regularity in their membership rolls, they were also willing to adapt to the unique needs of a newly liberated people in a transitional period.

Despite some flexibility in its policies regarding membership, Gillfield upheld the strict moral code of the antebellum years. Church leaders closely monitored members’ behavior, and members checked one another as well, in obedience to biblical doctrine as they interpreted it and also, most likely, in the hope of ensuring that white observers were given no pretext to criticize black Baptists.²⁵⁵ Faithful marital relationships remained the foremost struggle and concern of Gillfield’s members and leaders. Baptists had always disciplined adultery and marital conflict, but in the postwar period, as former slaves

²⁵³ For an example of “watch care,” see Peter and Eve Randol of the Sandy River Baptist Church, Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Feb. 6, 1871. See Aug. 17, 1868 for stipulations of “watch care.” For an interesting conflict between Gillfield and Harrison Street Baptist over the membership of Amy Branch, who attempted to join Gillfield without a letter of dismissal from Harrison Street, see Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Aug. 3 and 17, Dec. 7, 1868, and Personal Record Book of Rev. Henry Williams, Jr., draft of letter dated Jul. 1, 1867.

²⁵⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Nov. 6, 1871.

²⁵⁵ See Cunningham, “Wandering in the Wilderness,” 188-89.

searched for lost spouses and sought to legalize their marriages, purity and fidelity apparently held special importance in the black evangelical community.²⁵⁶

Between 1868 and 1871, some sixty women were expelled from Gillfield for being in a “delicate state” out of wedlock or “having an heir without a husband.” In only five of those cases were their male partners disciplined along with them. Often a male deacon would charge such a woman “through the deaconist sisters.”²⁵⁷ But in 1870, at the prompting of Pastor Williams, the church voted to forbid deaconesses from bringing women’s charges against their lovers before the congregation, rescinding a rule that stated that the church ought to “seek after” the male accomplice. Since scripture mandated the testimony of two or three witnesses for every transgression, a lone individual could not sustain an accusation against another person.²⁵⁸ And since fornication generally went on without witnesses, most male offenders could elude church discipline even as those female fornicators who became pregnant could be held accountable. Williams did assure the congregation that the man’s sin did not escape the “all seeing God.”²⁵⁹ While Gillfield was strict in enforcing a code of sexual morality—particularly for women—its members readily forgave and accommodated those who repented; many of those excluded for sexual sins petitioned for and received restoration.

²⁵⁶ Tucker Family and Church Record Book, “List of Marriages Solemnized by the Rev. Lewis Tucker”; Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery & Freedom*, 413-31.

²⁵⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jun. 2, Jul. 7 and 20, Aug. 3, Sept. 7 and 21, Dec. 7 and 21, 1868, Jan. 18, Feb. 1 and 15, Mar. 1 and 15, Apr. 5, Jun. 7, Jul. 19, Oct. 4 and 18, Nov. 1 and 15, Dec. 20, 1869, Jan. 3, Apr. 11, Jun. 6 and 20, Nov. 7 and 21, Dec. 5, 1870, Jan. 16, Feb. 20, May 1, Jun. 5, Jul. 3, 17 and 24, Aug. 7, 21, Sept. 4 and 18, Oct. 2, Nov. 6, 1871. The records of this minute book only cover church meetings between 1868 and 1871.

²⁵⁸ For scripture references on the issue of witnesses, see Deut. 17:6 and 19:15, Matt. 18:16, and 2 Cor. 13:1.

²⁵⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jun. 20, Jul. 4 and 18, 1870.

Again at the urging of Pastor Williams, the church voted to repeal a rule stating that fornicators and adulterers could not return to the church until they married.²⁶⁰

At times, illicit liaisons involved members of different congregations; several cases were pursued by joint committees, as when Malinda Morris, facing expulsion from Gillfield, accused William James of Harrison Street during her trial.²⁶¹ When Fanny Myers of Harrison Street charged Montgomery Randolph of Gillfield with “being her seducer,” a joint committee conducted an investigation, whose findings led to Randolph’s acquittal.²⁶² On at least one occasion, Gillfield joined both Harrison Street and Third Baptist in overseeing marital fidelity. Mary Hill of Third Baptist accused Sarah Townes of Gillfield of having used language “unbecoming a Christian and a lady.” Townes confessed to the church but also alleged that Hill had allowed Townes’s husband to visit her late at night and had accepted gifts of food and wood from him. Two people from Harrison Street testified against Richard Townes, who was expelled. Although the churches could not determine whether anything immoral had occurred between Townes and Hill, the suggestion of impropriety was enough.²⁶³

In a case that involved three separate infractions, Mary Duffy was charged by Gillfield with “going to law” with Eliza Oliver. In Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, believers are discouraged from bringing one another before civil courts, since churches should be able to resolve their own disputes. In this case, the church learned that Oliver had struck Duffy after “finding her in company with her husband which she had forbid.”

²⁶⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Oct. 3, 1870.

²⁶¹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Oct. 19, Nov. 16, Dec. 21, 1868, Nov. 15, 1869, Jan. 3 and 17, Apr. 11, May 2, Jun. 20, 1870, Jul. 24, 1871; example from Jan. 3 and 17, 1870.

²⁶² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jan. 17 and Jun. 20, 1870.

²⁶³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Dec. 21, 1868.

Duffy and Thomas Oliver were then charged with having had improper relations, and all three parties were expelled.²⁶⁴

Just as marital fidelity was valued by black Baptists, so was marital harmony. In 1865, Ebenezer Baptist charged “Sister” Gray with “leaving her hosbon after being whipped by him.” After a committee counseled the couple, however, the two were “allowed to come together by shaking hands,” promising to live together as Christians.²⁶⁵ A few years later, Ellen Norris stated before a Gillfield meeting that she and her husband Thadious were “not living together as a man and his wife should,” and that her husband had “treated her very cruelly by beating and otherwise abusing her and entirely abandoning her house.” After investigating, the church found Ellen and Thadious “equally guilty”—he for beating her and she for “unchristianlike conduct”—and expelled them both.²⁶⁶ As in adulterous connections, domestic turmoil was sometimes inter-congregational; Gillfield’s Susan Fields and her husband, James, who was a member of Harrison Street, had a falling out in 1870. Gillfield determined that the fault lay with James and dropped the case against Susan.²⁶⁷

Sorting out spats between members often took prominence at Gillfield’s Monday night meetings. Peter Royal charged James Jones with striking him, and while Jones

²⁶⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jul. 25, Aug. 1, Sept. 5, 1870. For scripture reference on “going to law,” see 1 Cor. 6:6. See also Jun. 2, 1868, Jul. 19, Nov. 15, 1869, Nov. 7, Dec. 5, 19, 26 and 30, 1870, Jun. 19, 1871 for other cases of marital infidelity. Tommy Bogger has studied how First Baptist of Williamsburg advocated formalized marriages and disciplined fornication and adultery during the 1870s and 1880s, including a fascinating case in which a woman attempted to dupe church leaders into requiring her alleged lover to marry her by killing, skinning, and dressing a cat to pose as an illegitimate newborn baby. First Baptist Church [Williamsburg, Virginia], *Minutes*, Vol. I, 170-71, cited in Bogger, *Since 1776*, 35-38.

²⁶⁵ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 23, 1865.

²⁶⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Feb. 1 and 15, 1869. Ellen Norris was restored Sept. 6, 1869. For other examples of domestic unrest, see Jun. 16, Jul. 6 and 7, 1868, Jun. 7 and 19, Aug. 16, 1869, Jul. 25, Aug. 1, Dec. 5, 1870, Mar. 13 and 27, Jul. 3, 1871.

²⁶⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jun. 20, 1870. See also Oct. 12, Nov. 16, 1868, Jun. 7, Jul. 12, Nov. 1, 1869.

denied it, he did admit that “if he could have got to him he would have stamped his liver,” resulting in his expulsion from the church.²⁶⁸ After the church learned that Mary Dennis and Hester Bonner were “rangling or scuffling” in the street, both were expelled—Bonner upon the testimony of her own brother.²⁶⁹ As always, the church expressed special concern for infractions that occurred in the public eye. James Campbell was charged not only with fighting, but also with having been “carried before law” for doing so. Even though he claimed he had acted in self-defense, the members voted to expel him. The church clearly wished to stay free of entanglements with the civil courts.²⁷⁰

A host of other offenses pepper the available records of Gillfield’s weekly meetings between 1868 and 1871—from using foul language and lying to drunkenness and dancing. Of the approximately 300 cases brought before the church court during this period, about 24 percent were cases of fornication and adultery; 16 percent of fighting and bickering; 11 percent of absence and Sabbath-breaking; 11 percent of dancing and attending parties; 10 percent of general “disorderly conduct,” usually in church meetings; 8 percent of drunkenness and selling alcohol; 6 percent of using foul, idle, or false speech; 4 percent of marital discord; 4 percent of disrespecting church authority; 3 percent of failing to report the sins of other members or falsely accusing them; 1 percent

²⁶⁸ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jul. 20 and Aug. 3, 1868. For other examples of bickering and fighting, see Jul. 20, Aug. 3 and 17, Sept. 7 and 21, Oct. 5, 12, and 19, Nov. 2, Dec. 21, 1868, Jan. 18, Mar. 15, Apr. 5, Jul. 19, Aug. 16, Sept. 6, Oct. 4 and 18, Nov. 15, Dec. 20, 1869, Jan. 3, May 16, Jun. 6, Aug. 15, Sept. 5, Dec. 26, 1870, Jan. 2 and 16, Feb. 6, Apr. 3, May 1 and 15, Jul. 3 and 17, Aug. 7, Sept. 4 and 18, Oct. 2 and 16, Nov. 6, 1871.

²⁶⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, May 1, 1871.

²⁷⁰ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Sept. 6 and 20, Oct. 4, 1869. Campbell was restored on Aug. 1, 1870. For other cases of members “carried before law” for fighting or theft, see Aug. 3 and 17, Oct. 19, 1868, Feb. 15, 1869, Sept. 6 and 20, Oct. 18, Nov. 1 and 15, 1869, Nov. 7, 1870.

of theft; and 1 percent of attending the circus or playing such games as dominoes and bagatelle.²⁷¹

The disciplinary regime at Gillfield was indeed strict. Church leaders expected all members to hold one another to account vigilantly, even to the extent of accusing people in one's own family. John Twine publicly charged his daughter Martha with dancing, and, although she denied it, the church expelled her.²⁷² S.P. Randol, on the other hand, was expelled for "negligence of duty" in not reporting his daughter Rebecca to the church for cursing.²⁷³ Overall, Gillfield's leaders advocated the same standards of moral behavior as in the antebellum period, and its members were just as watchful—if not more so—in maintaining them.²⁷⁴ Whether emancipation stimulated a tightening of church discipline and a heightened conscientiousness among leaders and members remains uncertain, but Gillfield's moral rigidity and orderly government demonstrate in significant part how at least one group of African Americans navigated the changes and challenges of the postwar period.

²⁷¹ For key examples, see Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jul. 5, 1869 (absence), Mar. 9, 1870 (dancing and partying), Apr. 20, 1870 (disorderly conduct at church meeting), Sept. 19, 1870 (disorderly conduct in the street), Nov. 16, 1868 (drunkenness), May 1, 1871 (selling alcohol), Dec. 5 and 19, 1870 (bad language), Nov. 2, 1868 (lying), Apr. 5 and 19, 1869 (disrespecting church authority), Jun. 19, Sept. 4 and 18, 1871 (not taking proper steps to accuse a fellow member), Dec. 26 and 30, 1870 (theft), Nov. 7, 1870 (attending the circus), Feb. 6 and 20, 1871 (playing dominoes), and Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Aug. 14, 1865 (accusing pastor of preaching false doctrine), Oct. 10, 1865 (theft), Apr. 9, 1866 (fornication).

²⁷² Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Dec. 21, 1868, Apr. 11, 1870. For another example of a familial accusation, see Jul. 19, 1869.

²⁷³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Dec. 26 and 30, 1870.

²⁷⁴ According to John O'Brien, "Both before and after the war, the black churches gave the community a social and religious focus, moral leadership, mechanisms for arbitrating disputes, and the moral sanctions for upholding proper conduct." O'Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 206-07. Rabinowitz contends that black urban churches were more disciplined than rural ones, and "often drew white praise." Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South*, 207. Gregory Wills demonstrates that while white Baptists seem to have relaxed church discipline after 1860, black churches "maintained most of their rigor." Yet, unlike Rabinowitz, Gregory Wills claims that rural black congregations were often stricter than urban ones. Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 68-69, 80-83.

While most church business addressed needs and problems within the body, supplemented occasionally by collaborative sessions with other black congregations, members sought as Christians to engage the surrounding community as well.²⁷⁵ A primary method of grappling with the period's myriad struggles was corporate prayer. Ebenezer set apart a Friday in February 1867 as a "thanksgiving day" to express gratitude for God's blessings and to "Pray for the Suffering Humanity," calling "all the ch[urc]hs in Richmond and Manchester" to join them in observing this day. The minutes do not indicate that this invitation was extended only to the area's black congregations.²⁷⁶ Gillfield held a special prayer meeting in March 1869 to petition for the Lord's "Guidance and Spirit to direct the Rulers of the Nation." The clerk composed invitations to include sister churches in the event.²⁷⁷

African American churches acted as spiritual, social, and political hubs for freedpeople; as E. Franklin Frazier put it, they acted as a "nation within a nation" and a "refuge in a hostile white world."²⁷⁸ Blacks sometimes attended church services and meetings to pray for family members lost through slavery and to generate networks to find them. Pastor Williams's personal record book includes a draft of a newsletter he apparently launched to gather and reproduce information about missing loved ones. The heartbreaking entries in this "Enquirer" demonstrate how slavery had wreaked havoc on black communities, and how freedpeople struggled to put their families back together.

²⁷⁵ For an example of Ebenezer's involvement with a council of local churches, see Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Oct. 12, 1868. Gillfield collaborated with Harrison Street Baptist from time to time, as when both churches conducted an investigation into charges against Harrison Street's pastor, Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jun. 6, 1870.

²⁷⁶ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Feb. 11, 1867.

²⁷⁷ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Mar. 1, 1869.

²⁷⁸ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 33-45, quotations on 44 and 45. For more on the central role of the church in the black communities of postwar Richmond, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Uncle Ned's Children: Negotiating Community and Freedom in Postemancipation Richmond" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1994), 42-72.

Benjamin Jackson hoped to locate his sister Sally, who had been sold out of Amelia County fifteen years earlier, while Agnes Mason sought word of her son, James, sold during the war when he was sixteen years old. Virginia Reese posted a notice seeking her mother Eliza, sold twenty years earlier from an estate in Petersburg. Jane Orange made an entry for the sake of her brother, daughter, sister, and two grandchildren, all sold away years before from estates in Chesterfield and Surry Counties.²⁷⁹ Williams's list goes on, leaving one to wonder whether these people ever found their fathers, sisters, mothers, brothers, and children. The church at least provided hope that such reunions might someday take place.

Member Elizabeth Smith experienced such a joyous moment in the spring of 1868, when Pastor Williams announced that he had received information that a former member, Cyrus Branch—who had run away from his master more than thirty years earlier—was attempting to find his wife and children. The elderly Branch, now known as John White, was living in Manchester, Vermont, and had asked an acquaintance, who was traveling to Petersburg, to make inquiries for him. When Williams made the announcement, Smith stepped forward and identified Branch as her father, whom she had not seen since she was five years old.²⁸⁰ Smith immediately took up a correspondence with her long-lost father, sadly informing him that her mother—presumably Branch's wife—had died only recently and that two of his daughters had been sold twenty years earlier. Another daughter—her sister Mary—was still alive, however, along with one of

²⁷⁹ Personal Record Book of Rev. Henry Williams, Jr., draft of "The Enquirer," Vol. 1, No. 1, Petersburg, Va. Issue begins, "Information of the following persons is hereby requested. An enquiry of their whereabouts, state, county, and post office address."

²⁸⁰ E[lizabeth] M[erwin] W[ickham], *A Lost Family Found: An Authentic Narrative of Cyrus Branch and His Family, Alias John White* (Manchester, VT, 1869), 5-7, available online at Documenting the American South. University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, added 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/wickham/wickham.html> (accessed Jul. 20, 2012).

Branch's sisters. She wrote also that "all the old Deacons that you left here are dead," listing several names of black leaders from the antebellum years. Yet she was pleased to tell her father that Gillfield was "in a prosperous condition," having recently undergone a revival.²⁸¹ Smith asked her father to send replies care of Rev. Williams, demonstrating how the church and pastor could serve to reunite displaced blacks even in remote corners of the nation.

Along with ministering to those seeking family members, churches sometimes provided aid to those in economic distress, a common problem during and after the Civil War. At Norfolk's First Baptist, Bute Street, pastor Lewis Tucker headed the Humane Aid Society to minister to disabled black war veterans.²⁸² The Poor Saints Fund at Gillfield was a fixed part of the church budget, and its officers gave a report of its activity each quarter. When an elderly "poor saint" of Gillfield was found in a "very bad condishun having no where to stay," in 1869, for instance, the church authorized the deacons to rent a house for her.²⁸³ But when the church considered whether to establish a general fund for the Petersburg poor, the motion was defeated; charity apparently was to begin *and end* at home, perhaps because members had only so much money to donate.²⁸⁴ William Kennedy, a black leader at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Henrico County, helped establish the Sons of Jacob mutual aid society after the war to "attend to each

²⁸¹ Elizabeth Smith to John White, Jun. 6 and 27, Jul. 28, Aug. 4, 1868, in Wickham, *Lost Family Found*, 6-7. Smith lists "brothers Holloway, Walker, Wilcox, Lewey, Cox, and Guivens"; an undated list of deacons in Gillfield's antebellum minutes includes Robert Holoway, William Walker, Wilcox (first name not provided), and Charles Leuey. Cox was not listed, but Smith's "Guivens" might have been a misspelling (or an incorrect transcription of her letter) of Coy Quivers, a long-standing deacon. Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1834-1849, Gillfield Baptist Church Records, 1827-1939, Accession #10041, microfilm reel M-1397, Small Special Collections Library, UVA. This minute book is located after the 1827-1853 book on the microfilm reel.

²⁸² *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 9; *Historic First Baptist Church*, 34.

²⁸³ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, May 3, 1869.

²⁸⁴ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Mar. 15 and Apr. 5, 1869.

other in time of sickness and distress and to see each other decently buried after death.”²⁸⁵

Other organizations, particularly mission societies such as Gillfield’s Daughters of the Convention, held regular meetings and collected funds during this period.²⁸⁶ As before the war, female members held fairs to raise money for church maintenance and pastors’ salaries.²⁸⁷

Lewis Tucker and First Baptist of Norfolk were also instrumental in organizing another popular endeavor of postwar black churches—day schools. Freedpeople of all ages attended classes at First Baptist after the war; likewise, with the assistance of missionary and aid societies including the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the New York National Freedman’s Relief Association, Ebenezer and the First and Second African Churches in Richmond set up day schools in their buildings by the end of 1865.²⁸⁸ Gillfield, on the other hand, voted down a proposal to establish a day school in 1868, noting that the church rules forbade use of the building for “any other purpose than Religious Worship.”²⁸⁹ The church leaders presumably supported secular education, as promoted by the regional and statewide black Baptist associations, but they thought it best to hold such instruction elsewhere.

²⁸⁵ Constitution of the Sons of Jacob (spelled “Jakeup”) mutual aid society, William Kennedy Papers, 1853-1870, Mss1 K3884a22, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA (hereafter VHS).

²⁸⁶ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Aug. 15 and Sept. 5, 1870.

²⁸⁷ Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Jun. 11, 1866; Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jul. 20, Sept. 7, Nov. 2, 1868, Dec. 19, 1870, Jan. 16, 1871. For information about First Baptist of Williamsburg’s fundraising and benevolent activities, see Bogger, *Since 1776*, 42-43. See also O’Brien, *From Bondage to Citizenship*, 328-31, for more on black religious, benevolent, and occupational societies in postwar Richmond.

²⁸⁸ *Documented History of the First Baptist Church...Norfolk*, 9; *Historic First Baptist Church*, 34; Ebenezer Baptist Church Minute Book, Sept. 1865 and Oct. 8, 1866; Freedmen’s Bureau report, Richmond, Virginia, Third District, Oct. 1865, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; an image of this document is found in Elvatrice Parker Belsches, *Richmond, Virginia*, Black America Series (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 56.

²⁸⁹ Gillfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1868-1871, Jul. 7, 1868.

The degree to which church members and leaders ought to become involved in politics was also debated in black congregations. Although association and church records do not discuss the political leanings or activities of clergymen and laymen, the involvement of black religious leaders in civil government provides at a minimum a strong circumstantial link between ecclesiastical and political organizations. As Eric Foner has shown, the ministry was one of the most common occupations of southern black officeholders—second only to farming—and a plurality of these ministers were Baptists.²⁹⁰

Henry Williams of Gillfield, for instance, served on the Petersburg City Council from 1872 to 1874. Although he was defeated when he later ran for Congress, he was able to help lead a movement to hire black teachers for black public schools.²⁹¹ One of Gillfield's trustees, Christopher Stevens, held a post on the city council alongside Williams.²⁹² Nelson Vandervall, who was both a deacon and a trustee at Richmond's First African Church, served in the Richmond City Council in the mid-1870s.²⁹³ Thomas Peake, a deacon at First Baptist of Hampton who had reportedly served as a Union spy, took office as Hampton's deputy sheriff soon after the war. His wife, Mary, was one of the first people in Hampton to teach literacy to slaves, and later freedmen, beginning in the 1850s.²⁹⁴ Rural black Baptists also sought political office, though less frequently than their urban counterparts. Burwell Toler, a minister who had established two churches in Hanover County, was elected to represent Hanover and Henrico Counties at the Virginia

²⁹⁰ Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, xxi. Foner notes that 243 out of approximately 1,757 southern black office-holders were ministers; 302 were farmers.

²⁹¹ Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 231.

²⁹² Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 203.

²⁹³ Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 218; First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book; Jan. 7 and May 5, 1850; also see transcript of deed transfer at the back of first minute book, 1841-1859.

²⁹⁴ Engs, *Freedom's First Generation*, 13, 47, 131.

Constitutional Convention of 1867-1868.²⁹⁵ Likewise, members of the Brown family of Elam Baptist Church served in a variety of positions in the Charles City County government.²⁹⁶

Mount Olive Baptist Church, formed in Henrico County after separating from an interracial church there, well demonstrates the significant link between black Baptists and political activity in the postwar period. A document among the papers of church leader William Kennedy includes the signatures of several local white and black men who pledged funds to help construct the church meeting house in 1870 on land purchased from white farmer John Bacon Crenshaw. The sponsors, interestingly all around thirty years of age, include Henrico County whites Benjamin F. Humphrey and William T. Bailey, a white customs house clerk, as well as publisher B.W. Gillis, circuit judge Alfred Morton, and U.S. Marshal David Parker—all born in the North and probably Republicans. Isaac Hunter, a black messenger for the Richmond city council, also signed the pledge. William Kennedy himself, though not listed among these contributors, was active in the Republican Party and had run for the House of Delegates in 1869.²⁹⁷

Just as black Virginia Baptist associational delegates debated to what extent freedmen should campaign for social equality, and just as black churchgoers considered whether they should separate or cooperate with whites, black politicians might differ

²⁹⁵ Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 213.

²⁹⁶ Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia*, 61.

²⁹⁷ Document addressed to Mount Olive Baptist Church, dated August 1, 1870, William Kennedy Papers, Mss1 K3884a18, VHS. The document contains the signatures of thirteen individuals; the seven legible signatures include B.W. Gillis, Alfred Morton, William T. Bailey, Benjamin F. Humphrey, and David B. Parker, whites, and Isaac H. Hunter and Abraham Hall, blacks. For more information about the ages, birthplaces, and occupations of these men, see the U.S. Federal Census of 1870, Henrico County. For more on William Kennedy's church and political involvement, including a Republican Party electoral ticket of 1869 that lists William Kennedy for House of Delegates, see William Kennedy Papers, VHS.

among themselves on issues of the day.²⁹⁸ John Dawson, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, took fire from members of his congregation for supporting white conservative candidates for state offices in 1869. Despite bitter attacks from some of his parishioners, Dawson himself took office as a state senator in 1874, as well as holding local city and county positions.²⁹⁹ When Jesse Dungee left the Republican Party—allegedly because it backed a candidate who had voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which outlawed racial discrimination in public accommodations and institutions—his congregation turned on him. His brethren apparently thought Dungee had become too closely allied with white conservatives, and he was forced out of church leadership, becoming, according to one newspaper, an “outcast and a wanderer” among Richmond blacks. Although unpopular in much of the black community, however, Dungee gained enough votes—apparently from local conservatives—to win a post in the Virginia House of Delegates in the early 1870s, in addition to serving as justice of the peace in King William County.³⁰⁰

While many postwar Afro-Baptists engaged enthusiastically in political activity, from voting to campaigning and office-holding, and although boundaries between sacred and secular movements were often fluid in black congregations, the primary focus of black churches remained Christian discipleship. Like their white counterparts, black

²⁹⁸ For a discussion of political debates within the black national Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention, see Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, 112-22.

²⁹⁹ Bogger, *Since 1776*, 33-35; Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia*, 10; Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 58.

³⁰⁰ For more on Dungee's involvement with conservatives, including his election as President of the Colored Conservative State Political Union in 1876, as well as his bitter disputes with Richmond blacks, including Pastor James Holmes of First Baptist (formerly First African) and Pastor Richard Wells of Ebenezer Baptist, see *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), Aug. 10, 15, and Sept. 8, 1876; Jun. 22 and Nov. 15, 1877; “outcast and wanderer” quotation from Jun. 22, 1877; articles cited in Taylor, *Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia*, 193; Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia*, 12-13; Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*, 67; Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 226-27, 233-34. See also Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War, 1865-1890* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 97-98.

Baptists were mission-minded—sending monetary donations and commissioning evangelists to faraway regions, while also establishing new congregations at home. One of the main duties of black Baptist associations was to assist “feeble churches,” and they set up committees to raise money to construct church buildings and hire pastors.³⁰¹ The postwar years were ones of immense growth for the black evangelical community; the Shiloh Association was pleased to welcome fifty-two new churches into its body in 1871 alone.³⁰²

At some point after the Civil War, someone at Antioch Baptist Church in Sussex County attempted to update its roll of black members. The disorganized roster lists the names of many black men and women, many of which were then scratched out, indicating their removal from membership. Among these lists, carefully scrawled in oversized and stylized script, is a curious entry, “Alfred Pegram, The only Colored member at Antioch.” One wonders who recorded this man’s name—perhaps it was Pegram himself. The entry raises the question of why, after all other black men and women had left Antioch, Pegram decided to stay. The church hired him as sexton in 1874, and perhaps he chose to remain because of this position, or in order to get the job in the first place, but perhaps he had other reasons.³⁰³ In any case, someone thought it important enough to make a note of Pegram’s choice to stay on—reflecting both the drastic level of postwar evangelical segregation, as well as the desire of a small number

³⁰¹ *Minutes of the...Virginia Baptist State Convention...1868*, 6, 15.

³⁰² *Minutes of the...Shiloh Colored Baptist Association...1871*, 7.

³⁰³ Antioch (Raccoon Swamp) Baptist Church Minute Book, lists in back of minute book (p. 392 of minute book); Aug. 8, 1874. The Federal Census of 1870 for Sussex County includes a 45-year-old black farm laborer named Alford Pegram, likely the same man. Walnut Grove also employed a black sexton after the war, at the same annual \$12 salary as Pegram. Walnut Grove Baptist Church Minute Book, Jan. 2, 1867.

of blacks and whites to continue in fellowship with one another. While Pegram was an anomaly at Antioch, Virginia's Baptist churches included a significant number like him.



Antioch (Raccoon Swamp) Baptist Church Minute Book, 1837-1892, church roster, VBHS

As Leon Litwack has shown in studying the general population of freedmen and freedwomen in the postwar South, black and white Baptists responded to the war and emancipation in a host of different ways.³⁰⁴ Most blacks who had been members of mixed-race congregations chose to seek membership elsewhere. Among those who had served as slaves on Virginia's farms and plantations, some stayed in their longtime neighborhoods, helping to organize the many new black churches that sprang up in rural areas. Others migrated into the cities and joined the large, dynamic congregations there, many of which had long been a presence in Virginia's urban centers. And finally, a few freedmen and -women chose to stay where they were, remaining in fellowship with whites either for theological, emotional, personal, or practical reasons.

Although whites generally did not force blacks out of their churches, and sometimes even asked them to stay, they were, as a whole, relieved at the separation.

³⁰⁴ Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

Few were willing to meet their black brethren on equal terms, and they offered a fellowship marked by paternalism and steeped in conditions. As the tide of segregation swept through the South, and as a new generation of Baptists filled the pews—men and women who were not used to seeing faces of different colors during worship—the hopes for interracial fellowship grew thin.

The records of mixed-race and Afro-Baptist congregations offer insight into how black and white Virginians handled the fallout of dramatic social change. Black churches provided members with a variety of resources—spiritual and fraternal—to face the challenges of freedom. Whether through attempts to locate lost loved ones, discipline for the wayward, charity for poor members, education for both laity and clergy, or simply by serving as spaces for unmolested gatherings and unhindered worship, black churches knit communities of freedpeople together in a society that continued to be dominated by whites. Even as they held on to the Christian principles and practices that they had long shared with white evangelicals—confession, conversion, self-discipline, and evangelism—black Baptist leaders paved a road separate from whites. And while most freedmen and –women chose to follow this road, the variety of ways they took in getting on it, as well as the fact that some did not, demonstrates that the complexity of southern Baptist race relations continued to some degree long after the war had ended.

Conclusion: “Free in Body as Well as Soul”



John Jasper (1812-1901), c. 1901, pastor of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church (1867-1901)
Photograph courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Collection, Special Collections,
The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia

From his pulpit at Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, in 1870, the Reverend John Jasper could look out across the faces of his congregation and reflect on how much had changed for them over the past decade. The chains of slavery had been broken, Virginia’s laws restricting black assemblies and literacy and prohibiting black preaching had been revoked, black men now exercised the right to vote and hold political office, and black schools were proliferating across the South. Dramatic demographic shifts were taking place—particularly in church populations, as Afro-Christians overwhelmingly moved from interracial congregations to black ones. Black ministers were receiving formal ordination and taking charge of these congregations, and black trustees were obtaining property titles to church land and buildings.

Founded by a small group of black Baptists led by Rev. Jasper in September 1867, Sixth Mount Zion first met in an abandoned Confederate stable on Brown’s Island

in the James River. After gathering in other locations such as a cooper's and a carpenter's shops, the congregation settled in a small brick building at the corner of Duval and St. John Streets by 1870, where a Sunday school soon began as well.¹ Deriving its name from its place as the sixth black Baptist church to emerge in Richmond, Jasper's congregation included around two hundred members in 1870, fifty of whom had joined via letters of dismission from other churches—no doubt many of them white-led—in that year alone.²

Yet John Jasper had launched his ministry long before the members of Sixth Mount Zion started worshipping together. Born a slave in Fluvanna County in 1812, as a young man Jasper was hired out to work in the Richmond tobacco factory of Samuel Hargrove, a leader at the First Baptist Church.³ While walking through Richmond's Capitol Square on July 4, 1839, Jasper apparently became “deeply convicted of his sins”

¹ Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church still meets at this location in a large brick edifice constructed in 1887 by George Boyd, a well-known black builder, and remodeled in 1925 by black architect Charles T. Russell and black builder I. Lincoln Bailey. Historical Records Survey of Virginia, Works Projects Administration, *Inventory of the Church Archives of Virginia: Negro Baptist Churches in Richmond* (Richmond: Historical Records Survey of Virginia, 1940), 36-38; “Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia: ‘A Celebration of 130 Years of Christian Heritage,’ 1867-1997,” church history pamphlet, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia; Tyler Potterfield, “Architectural History of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church,” Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, 1996, <http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/vbha/6th8.html> (accessed Nov. 17, 2012).

² *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Session of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia, Held with the Delevan Church, Charlottesville, Virginia, August 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th, 1870* (Richmond: V.L. Fore, 1870), 18, in *African-American Baptist Annual Reports, 1865-1990*, Virginia, (Rochester, NY: American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Historical Library, 1997), microfilm reel 101.

³ E[dwin]. A[rcher]. Randolph, *The Life of Rev. John Jasper, Pastor of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia...* (Richmond: R.T. Hill & Co., 1884), 8-9, available online at Documenting the American South. University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter DocSouth), added 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jasper/jasper.html> (accessed Nov. 17, 2012); William E. Hatcher, *John Jasper: The Unmatched Negro Philosopher and Preacher* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 16-17, 26-27, available online at DocSouth, added 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/hatcher/hatcher.html> (accessed Nov. 17, 2012); *Inventory of the Church Archives of Virginia*, 37. Edwin Archer Randolph, a black lawyer, civic leader, and journalist in Richmond, graduated as Yale University's first black law student in 1880. J. Clay Smith, Jr., *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844-1944* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 37, 225-26. William E. Hatcher, a graduate of Richmond College in 1858, was a white Virginia Baptist scholar and pastor. Eldridge B. Hatcher, *William E. Hatcher: A Biography* (Richmond, VA: W.C. Hill Printing Co., 1915).

and a few weeks later saw it “his duty to make a confession of faith in Christ and to unite himself with the church.”⁴ Jasper joined the First Baptist Church, which was soon to split along racial lines, forming the First African Church in 1841.⁵ According to biographer William Hatcher, Jasper’s white employer, Samuel Hargrove, earnestly celebrated Jasper’s conversion with him and encouraged him to preach.⁶ During the next two decades, a time in which Virginia’s law prohibiting black preaching and exhorting remained on the books, Jasper became one of the best-known religious orators in the Richmond-Petersburg region, if not the state.

Jasper began his preaching career by delivering sermons for black funerals, sometimes at the request of masters for their deceased slaves. His reputation soon spread, and throngs of people—black and white—attended his sermons. While his biographers cite a small number of cases in which Jasper was harassed by local whites for having “no right” to preach, for the most part he seems to have carried out this highly public—and completely illegal—work unmolested.⁷ Biographer Edwin A. Randolph, a black lawyer and contemporary of Jasper, recounted how, after hearing Jasper speak, members of Petersburg’s black Third Baptist Church invited him to preach to their congregation twice

⁴ Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 9.

⁵ Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 31-32.

⁶ Hatcher, *John Jasper*, 24-29. For an insightful discussion of the “ambiguity” of Hatcher’s simultaneous “condescension” toward and genuine “appreciation” of John Jasper, see Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175-77. Based on Hatcher’s strong emphasis on the role of Samuel Hargrove in Jasper’s conversion and ministry, Schweiger ultimately concludes that, in Hatcher’s mind, “all black spirituality sprang from a white source,” Schweiger, *Gospel Working Up*, 177.

⁷ Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 12-17, quotation on 14; Hatcher, *John Jasper*, 36-46. When discussing how Jasper’s father was also an enslaved preacher, Hatcher demonstrated ignorance of Virginia law, noting that “negro preachers were not allowed, except by the consent of their masters, to go abroad preaching the Gospel.” Hatcher, *John Jasper*, 31. The law of 1832 actually prohibited any free black or enslaved person from preaching or exhorting in any circumstance. Acts of the General Assembly, 1832, Chap. XXII:1, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly...One Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty-Two* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 20. Nevertheless, noted Hatcher, “there were negro preachers in that day just the same—scores of them,” Hatcher, *John Jasper*, 32.

a month. Jasper accepted, gaining popularity not only among the members at Third Baptist, but with the black congregations of Gillfield and Harrison Street as well.⁸ While white leaders were appointed by local white congregations and by the Portsmouth Association to shepherd Third Baptist, Jasper was, according to Randolph, “virtually the pastor of the church.”⁹

During the Civil War, Jasper preached to Confederate soldiers in Richmond hospitals “with impunity,” as well as to mill hands at the factory where he worked on the James River above the city. In early April 1865, with the Union conquest of Richmond, Jasper became “a free man in body as well as soul.”¹⁰ He continued his preaching at Third Baptist until 1866, having been formally elected pastor by that congregation at the end of the war. He went on to perform “general missionary work” in the region—no doubt fulfilling various preaching engagements—until he established Sixth Mount Zion.¹¹

While Jasper could reflect on the monumental transformation that had occurred in his own life, as in the lives of blacks in his congregation and far beyond, he could also observe a measure of continuity in black religious life. In the years before the war, he had attained a remarkable position as an evangelical leader in the face of restrictive state

⁸ Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 18-21; Hatcher, *John Jasper*, 45-46. For John Jasper’s interaction with the First African Baptist Church in Richmond, including confirmation of his invitation to preach in Petersburg, see First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Minute Book, 1841-1930, Oct. 7, 1855, Jan. 2, Feb. 7, 1858, Aug. 7, 1859, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. See also Chapter 2 of this dissertation, pp. 209 and 218, and Chapter 3, p. 316.

⁹ Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 19. For white “brother” R.R. Overby’s appointment to preach at Third Baptist in 1853, see *Minutes of the Sixty-Third Annual Session of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association, Held at Suffolk, Nansemond County, May 20th, 21st and 23^d, 1853* (Richmond, H.K. Ellyson, 1853), 8, VBHS. It is unclear whether Third Baptist had a regular white preacher before that point.

¹⁰ Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 27-28.

¹¹ Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 28-29. For more on Jasper’s fascinating and widely popular career in the second half of the nineteenth century, including his famous “The Sun Do Move” sermon, see Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, and Hatcher, *John Jasper*. Jasper’s preaching style, particularly his unconventional and unscientific views on scripture in “The Sun Do Move,” drew fire from other black leaders, including pastor Richard Wells of Ebenezer Baptist in Richmond. For the clash between Jasper and Wells in 1878, see Randolph, *Life of Rev. John Jasper*, 35-43.

legislation and hostility from some, though by no means all, whites. Other, less renowned black Baptist preachers and congregational leaders had done the same. Black churchgoers increasingly met separately from white members during the antebellum period, nurturing an autonomous tradition of leadership and discipline that reached fruition in the postwar period. Black congregations, like Sixth Mount Zion and Jasper's first church home at First African, expanded dramatically as black men and women left white-led churches, but many of these black congregations had already had strong black governments in place well before emancipation.



Sketch of the interior of First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, c. 1874
Harper's Weekly, Vol. XVIII, Jun. 27, 1874

White Baptists demonstrated continuity in the postwar years as well, remaining divided in how they approached black brethren. Some behaved condescendingly, even contemptuously, toward black fellow Baptists, glad in the end to see their churches rid of freedmen and -women. Others attempted, after emancipation as before, to maintain fellowship with blacks, but they often offered that fellowship with conditions that would have kept blacks subordinate in church governance. Still others assisted black leaders in setting up new organizations, participated in ordinations of black clergy, helped draft

church constitutions, or offered land and buildings for black churches. As before the war, many white southern Baptists, who professed their dedication to doctrines of Christian love, fraternity, and unity, maintained a bifurcated view of black believers—embracing them as fellow saints but often countenancing unequal treatment of them.

The bitter irony of the history of nineteenth-century Baptists in the Tidewater, and in the South as a whole, is that even as blacks exercised religious leadership and achieved a real measure of autonomy, the interracial ties that had once marked evangelical gatherings frayed and ultimately disintegrated, especially once the black dream of freedom became a reality. Indeed, black Baptists' very desire to express a dynamic Christian faith unhindered by racial restrictions—along with white Baptists' continued attempt to walk a line between spiritual kinship and racial hierarchy—contributed to a gradual parting of ways that began before emancipation and accelerated dramatically after 1865. While neither Nat Turner's revolt and subsequent legislation, nor the white southern counterattack against abolitionism, derailed interracial empathy and cooperation among Virginia Baptists, emancipation did. Although they still maintained an abstract belief in spiritual equality, white Baptists were not willing to tender practical equality to their black brethren, and they proved even more ambivalent about extending Christian fellowship to black people during Reconstruction than they had been before the war.

Church buildings that once had been populated by white and black neighbors became one of the first institutions in the South to segregate the races. Southern black Baptists, although their churches flourished, maintained little connection with whites with whom they had long shared the same faith. More than a few of those white Christians, or their forebears, had sustained the right of black Baptists to preach and to lead in the face

of post-Nat Turner laws aimed at obliterating those rights; but when all was said and done, white Baptists exchanged the banner of Christian brotherhood for the standard of the social order. The possibilities of the biracial church, the place that more than any other had drawn antebellum blacks and whites together, remained tragically unfulfilled.¹²

¹² While this dissertation was being completed, black pastor Fred Luter, Jr. of New Orleans was elected as the first black president of the Southern Baptist Convention on June 19, 2012. The organization officially had apologized in 1995 for its historic stand on slavery and white supremacy, and the number of African Americans in the convention continues to grow. *New York Times*, Jun. 17, 2012; *Washington Post*, Jun. 19, 2012.

APPENDIX

CHURCHES STUDIED, LISTED BY COUNTY OR CITY

Caroline County (Dover Baptist Association; part of Rappahannock Baptist Association after 1843)

Providence Baptist Church

Charles City County (Dover Baptist Association)

Elam Baptist Church

Essex County (Dover Baptist Association; part of Rappahannock Baptist Association after 1843)

Enon Baptist Church

Hampton (Dover Baptist Association)

**Hampton Baptist (First Baptist) Church
Zion Baptist Church**

Hanover County (Dover Baptist Association)

**Berea Baptist Church
Bethlehem Baptist Church
Hopeful Baptist Church
Mount Olivet Baptist Church
Taylorsville Baptist Church
Walnut Grove Baptist Church**

Henrico County (Dover Baptist Association)

**Boar Swamp Baptist Church
Four Mile Creek Baptist Church**

Isle of White County (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

**Beaver Dam Baptist Church
Mill Swamp Baptist Church
Smithfield Baptist Church**

James City County (Dover Baptist Association)

**Chickahominy Baptist Church
James City Baptist Church**

King and Queen County (Dover Baptist Association; part of Rappahannock Baptist Association after 1843)

**Bruington Baptist Church
Mattaponi Baptist Church
Upper King and Queen Baptist Church**

King William County (Dover Baptist Association)

**Beulah Baptist Church
Colosse Baptist Church**

Middlesex County (Dover Baptist Association; part of Rappahannock Baptist Association after 1843)

Glebe Landing Baptist Church

Nansemond County (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

**Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church
South Quay Baptist Church (location changed from Southampton County to
Nansemond County in 1830s or 1840s)
Suffolk Baptist Church**

New Kent County (Dover Baptist Association)

Emmaus Baptist Church (moved from Charles City County in 1817)

Norfolk City (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

**First Baptist Church (Bute Street)
First Colored Baptist Church (Charlotte and Catherine Streets; later Bank Street)**

Norfolk County (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

**North West Baptist Church
Portsmouth (Court Street) Baptist Church**

Northumberland County (Dover Baptist Association; part of Rappahannock Baptist Association after 1843)

**Fairfields Baptist Church
Wicomoco (Coan) Baptist Church**

Petersburg (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

**First (African) Baptist Church (Harrison Street)
Gillfield Baptist Church
Third African (Third Colored) Baptist Church**

Richmond City (Dover Baptist Association)

**Ebenezer (Third African) Baptist Church
First African Baptist Church
First Baptist Church
Leigh Street Baptist Church
Second African Baptist Church
Second Baptist Church**

Southampton County (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

**Black Creek Baptist Church
South Quay Baptist Church (location changed to Nansemond County in 1830s or 1840s)
Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church**

Surry County (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

Moore's Swamp Baptist Church

Sussex County (Portsmouth Baptist Association)

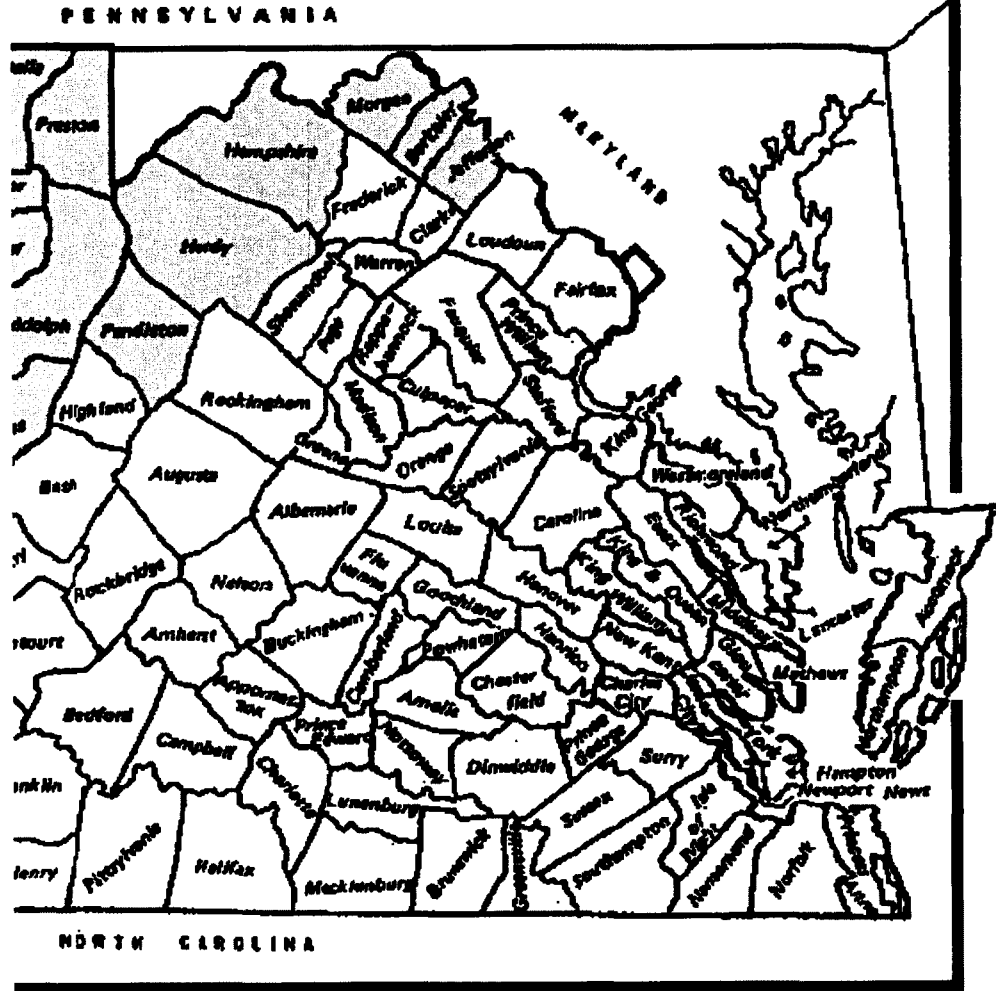
**Elam (Seacock) Baptist Church
Raccoon Swamp (Antioch) Baptist Church**

Williamsburg (Dover Baptist Association)

**Williamsburg African Baptist Church (First Baptist Church)
Zion Baptist Church**

VIRGINIA

1850



County Map of Virginia, 1850 (eastern half)
Courtesy of the Library of Virginia, Richmond, <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/wv/map.htm>.

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- Shoulder's Hill Baptist Church Minute Books, 1783-1907, 1845-1869
- Smithfield Baptist Church Minute Book, 1830-1894
- South Quay Baptist Church Minute Books, 1775-1827, 1827-1899
- Suffolk Baptist Church Minute Books, 1827-1854, 1855-1907
- Taylorville Baptist Church Minute Book, 1841-1861
- Tucker's Swamp Baptist Church Minute Books, 1818-1857, 1858-1906
- Upper King and Queen Baptist Church Minute Books, 1774-1815, 1815-1836, 1836-1855, 1855-1897

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