

HISTORY OF TRIUMPH OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN VIRGINIA'S AMENDMENT

A.D. 1662.—It was enacted by the Colonial Legislature of Virginia that: "Whereas many schismatical persons, out of their averseness to the orthodox established religion, or out of the new-fangled conceit of their own heretical inventions, refuse to have their children baptized. Be it therefore enacted, that all persons that, in contempt of the divine sacrament of Baptism, shall refuse when they may carry their child to a lawful minister in that county to have them baptized, shall be amerced two thousand pounds of tobacco; half to the informer, and half to the public."

Under this law, men and women were indicted and fined for not going to the Episcopal Church, and others banished from the colony.

A. D. 1768.—John Waller, Lewis Craig, James Childs, and others were arranged before the magistrates in Spotsylvania Co. for preaching the Gospel and sentenced to imprisonment in Fredericksburg jail.

A. D. 1770.—Webber and Anthony were apprehended and kept in Chesterfield jail for about three months. In 1771, a magistrate in Middlesex, "backed by two sheriffs, the parson and a posse," seized Webber, Waller, Ware, and Greenwood, and sent them to jail. Waford, a layman, was severely beaten with a whip and carried the scars to his grave. James Ireland was arrested and tried by magistrates in Culpepper who insulted him, and thrust him into jail.

A.D. 1771.—In same county, Sanders, Craig, Maxwell and Ammond were imprisoned for preaching. Maxwell and Bank not preachers, for holding a prayer meeting.

A.D. 1771.—The General Association of Virginia Baptists was organized.

A.D. 1774.—At the session of the Association, letters were received from preachers confined in prison, and public fast days were set apart "in behalf of our poor blind persecutors, and for the release-ment of our brethren."

A.D. 1775.—General Association memorialized the Virginia Convention approving military re-

sistance to Great Britain. A declaration of principles was drawn up affirming "that the mere toleration of religion by the civil government is insufficient; that no State religious establishment ought to exist; that all religious denominations ought to stand on the same footing."

It was answered by the passage of a law that dissenting clergymen be permitted to celebrate divine worship to preach to soldiers and exhort. (Journal, 17 Hawks).

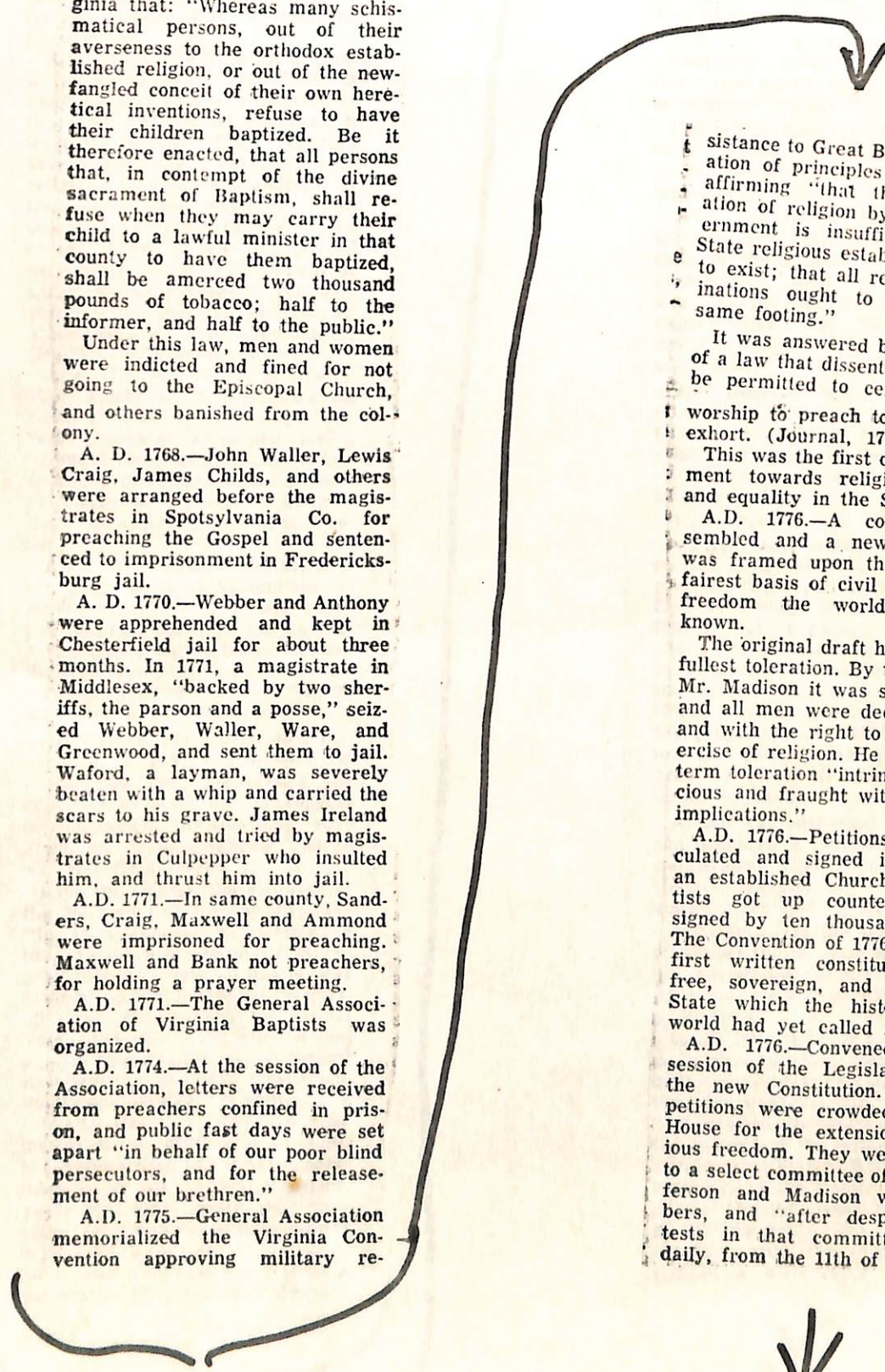
This was the first decided movement towards religious freedom and equality in the State.

A.D. 1776.—A convention assembled and a new constitution was framed upon the fullest and fairest basis of civil and religious freedom the world had ever known.

The original draft had the words fullest toleration. By the efforts of Mr. Madison it was scratched out and all men were declared equal, and with the right to the free exercise of religion. He declared the term toleration "intrinsically fallacious and fraught with dangerous implications."

A.D. 1776.—Petitions were circulated and signed in behalf of an established Church. The Baptists got up counter petitions, signed by ten thousand persons. The Convention of 1776 made "the first written constitution for a free, sovereign, and independent State which the history of the world had yet called forth."

A.D. 1776.—Convened the first session of the Legislature under the new Constitution. Numerous petitions were crowded upon the House for the extension of religious freedom. They were referred to a select committee of which Jefferson and Madison were members, and "after desperate contests in that committee almost daily, from the 11th of October to



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On the 5th of December, a bill was brought in repealing the laws which restrained freedom of religious opinion or worship, exempting dissenters from all levies, taxes, and impositions whatever for the support of the Established Church."

A.D. 1777.—The General Association appointed a committee to examine and report whichever of the laws of the commonwealth were oppressive. They reported several laws which interfered with religious liberty. An address to the Legislature brought these objectionable laws to the notice of that body. A law was passed suspending the collection of taxes for the support of religious teachers, against the petitions of Episcopalians and Methodists. (Hawk's Episcopalian I, 139).

A.D. 1778.—The General Association appointed a committee on "civil grievances." The proposition very generally advocated for a "general assessment," and the law confining marriages to the Episcopal clergy were presented them to the General Assembly and seek relief.

A.D. 1779.—The Commissioners of the General Association reported the draft of a bill which put religious freedom on its true basis, also a memorial to legalize the marriages, which under the advice of Patrick Henry, Baptist ministers had celebrated.

After three years of heated discussions, a law was passed repealing all laws authorizing the collection of taxes for the support of the clergy. "By this act," says Jefferson, "the Anglican Church was entirely put down."

Says Dr. Hawks, the historian of the Episcopal Church of Virginia: "In each successive meeting of the Legislature from 1776 to 1779 this question on taxes was brought up for discussion. In 1777, all things being ready for a final vote, the question was settled against the system of a general assessment, and the Establishment was finally put down. The Baptists were the principal promoters of this work, and, in truth, aided more than any other denomination in its accomplishment. Their historian boasts that they alone were uniform in their efforts to destroy the system of an assessment, and introduce the plan of a voluntary contribution. Whether

this be so or not, it is very certain that in the associations of that sect, held from year to year, a prominent subject of discussion always was as to the best mode of carrying on the war against the Establishment. (10,197).

A.D. 1780.—A law was passed authorizing dissenting ministers (free and adults to be licensed) to celebrate marriage.

1781.—The General Association met and then adjourned, as Cornwallis occupied the neighborhood where they met.

1782-83.—Says Dr. Hawks: "After their (the Baptists') final success in the matter of voluntary contribution their next efforts were to procure a sale of the church lands, and their efforts never ceased until the glebe lands were sold." (Hawks, i, 153).

The General Association reappointed a committee on "Civil Grievances" and on their petition a law was passed by the Assembly authorizing all ministers to celebrate marriages.

1785.—Petitions for and against a general assessment—by Episcopalians and Methodists for—and partially Presbyterians: by Baptists as a body, against. It asked that an act be passed compelling every one to contribute something in proportion to his property for the support of religion. Patrick Henry was the great champion of the proposition. General Washington and Richard Henry Lee favored it, while Madison and Jefferson opposed.

Action was postponed and Madison prepared a memorial and remonstrance (found in Semple's History) against it, which was widely circulated by the Baptists.

A.D. 1785.—On the reassembling (October) the General Assessment bill was abandoned and the bill for religious freedom became the law of Virginia.

In the long struggle the Baptists as a denomination stood as one man and alone, except as aided by the few Quakers. Mr. Jefferson, who drafted the bill, recognized the support of the Baptists in this religious revolution. Writing to the members of the Baptist church of Black Mountain—his neighbors—in 1809, he said: "We have acted together from the origin to the end of a memorable revolution,

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and we have contributed, each in the line allotted to us, our endeavors to render its issues a permanent blessing to our country." Dr. Hawks said, "this law was regarded by many as subversive in its declaration of the Christian religion," and it "called forth at the time the severest animadversions of some who still revered the faith of the apostles." (Jefferson's Works. Hawks).

A.D. 1787.—Baptist General Committee urged the sending of petitions to Assembly for the repeal of the law incorporating the Episcopal Church, and on the 9th of January the law was repealed.

1787.—The General Committee declared that the glebe lands (land appropriated by the State to the Episcopal rectors) were public property—as they had been bought with money collected from all classes.

A.D. 1789.—In answer to petitions gotten up by the Baptist General Committee an act was passed recognizing the principle that all property belonging to the Episcopal Church devolved on the good people of the Commonwealth.

A.D. 1802.—The glebes were ordered to be sold.

Says Dr. Hakes: "Persecution had taught the Baptists not to love the Establishment. In their association they had calmly discussed the matter and resolved on their course. In this course they were consistent to the end; and the war which they waged against the church was a war of extermination. They seem to have known no relentings, and their hostility never ceased for twenty-seven years." Hawks I, 194.

The victory was won, and the Old Dominion, after the religious oppression of two centuries, stood forth erect, unfettered, free to worship God without human permission or hindrance.

1787.—The Constitution of the United States as adopted, had this article: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office in the United States."

1788.—In March, the General Committee of the Baptists of Virginia met in Goochland. A religious political subject was taken up: "Whether the new Federal Constitution, which had now lately made its appearance in public,

made sufficient provision for the secure enjoyment of religious liberty?" It was agreed unanimously that, in the opinion of the General Committee, it did not. The Convention of Virginia met to pass on the constitution, three months after the General Committee had taken this action. It ratified it with a reservation that no right of any denomination can be abridged by the Government, and, among other essential rights, liberty of conscience cannot be abridged, restrained, or modified. New Hampshire and New York ratified with similar declarations.

1789.—An Address was presented by the Baptist Committee to General Washington, saying: "When the Constitution first made its appearance in Virginia, we, as a society, had unusual strugglings of mind, fearing that liberty of conscience, dearer to us than property or life, was not sufficiently secured. Perhaps our jealousies were heightened by the usage we received in Virginia under the regal government, when mobs, fines, bonds, and prisons were our frequent repast." Washington replied assuring them of his "readiness to use his influence to make these rights indisputable, and declared that the Baptists had been the persevering promoters of the glorious Revolution." (Reply in full in Ford's "Origin of Baptists.") The very next month the first amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," was proposed by Virginia and passed by Congress August 4, 1784.

Who fought the battle of religious liberty in Virginia, where the first amendment to the Constitution originated? Baptists. And victors in the perilous fight, they had a right to claim the honor, as the struggle and the triumph spring from their principles, and illustrate the doctrines they believe and teach.

Note: Clipping sent in by Eld. R. G. Holland, Columbia, a member of the Mississippi Baptist Commission on History. L.S.W.