

# 1 – Apostles of Liberty

By Harriet Sigerman

**1768:** The quest for religious freedom in Spotsylvania County, Virginia

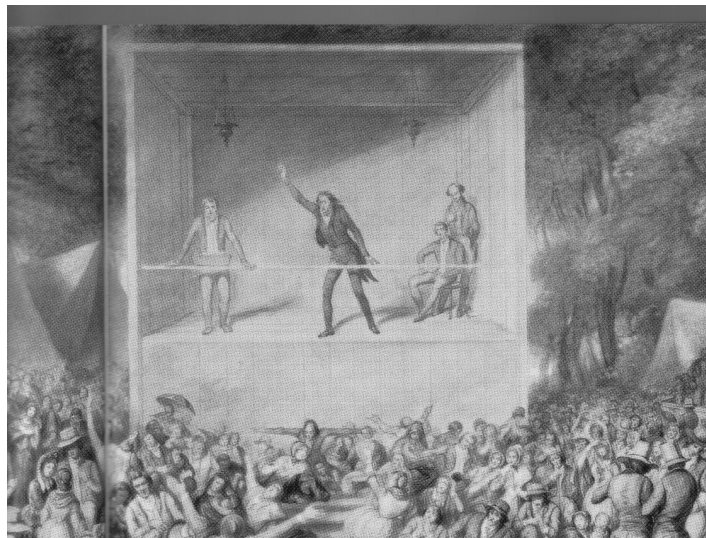
*In the United States, we often take for granted our right to worship as we please or not at all. Religious freedom is guaranteed in the First Amendment to the Constitution. But this right did not always exist. Before the American Revolution, most of the colonies had established an official Christian denomination, which all residents were required to support.*

*In Virginia, the Church of England (also called the Anglican Church) was the established form of Christianity, and it was supported through public taxation. But as new religious ideas and groups came to Virginia, dissenters began to question both the practices and power of the Anglican Church.*

*The Separate Baptists were one religious sect that challenged the authority of the established church. As a result, Separate Baptist preachers were brutally attacked throughout the colony. But from their persecution was born a remarkable contribution to the quest for religious freedom in Virginia and, ultimately, in the newly independent nation.*

June 4, 1768, John Waller, Lewis Craig and three other men stood before a magistrate in a courthouse in Spotsylvania County, Va. Their crime: disturbing the peace by preaching the tenets of their faith.

The men were Separate Baptists, religious dissenters who posed a threat to the colony's established church, the Church of England. The Separates were widely reviled for their religious zeal and earnest appeals to follow both the letter and spirit of the Gospel. As the attorney who prosecuted them declared, "These men ... cannot meet a man upon the road but they must ram a text of scripture down his throat."



**Large crowds would camp out all night to hear the fiery Baptist preachers.**

The jury sentenced the defendants to jail but offered to release them if they promised not to preach in the county for a year and a day. Waller, Craig and one other

Separate minister refused. They were promptly led to the jailhouse in nearby Fredericksburg. As the preachers walked through the streets, they sang a hymn:

*Broad is the road that leads to death,  
And thousands walk together there;  
But wisdom shows a narrow path,  
With here and there a traveler.*

Their voices, filled with passion and conviction, aroused curiosity and sympathy among spectators. People murmured words of encouragement for the three brave men who were willing to go to prison for their right to preach and worship as they saw fit.

For 43 days, the preachers remained in the stone prison, crowded together in a tiny cell. But even imprisonment could not silence them, and the ministers continued to preach through the small grated window of their cell. Every day, people swarmed around the window to hear them. Rabble-rousers tried to drive the crowds away or sang obscene songs to drown out the preachers' words, but the faithful continued to flock to the jailhouse window.

It was ironic that John Waller found himself sharing a jail cell with Lewis Craig. Just two years earlier, Craig had been the first Separate Baptist preacher arrested for "unlawful preaching" in Virginia, and Waller sat on the jury that decided his fate. At the time, Waller was a member of the Church of England. Like other Anglicans, he detested the Separate Baptists and everything they stood for.

The two religious sects could not have been more different. Transplanted by the first English settlers to Virginia and to other Southern colonies, the Anglican Church governed every aspect of colonial life. Colonists were required to attend Sunday services and to contribute corn and tobacco, as well as livestock, to support the church. Anglican services were elaborate and formal and did not encourage personal involvement.



**The Anglican Church governed every aspect of life in colonial Virginia.**

Nor were the Anglicans known for being very devout. Many - including John Waller - enjoyed a festive social life of drinking, gambling and merrymaking. In fact, Waller so enjoyed a night of carousing that he was sometimes called the "Devil's Adjutant (assistant)" and had earned the nickname "Swearing Jack Waller."

Anglicans believed that men of wealth and power should govern, and more affluent parishioners occupied the best pews in the churches. Waller himself came from a wealthy,

long-established English family and enjoyed an esteemed position within the church. Because many planters and other slave-owners were Anglican, the church did not condemn the practice of slavery.

In appearance, conduct and religious beliefs, the Separate Baptists were the antithesis of the Anglicans. Extremely pious, the Separate Baptists rejected all frivolous activity such as drinking and gambling. Furthermore, in their fellowship, every member prayed as an equal without regard to social or economic rank. This more democratic form of worship stood in stark contrast to Anglican elitism, and it greatly appealed to less educated and more humble rural colonists.

Most troubling to the Anglicans, the Separate Baptists strongly condemned slavery and invited Black slaves to join their churches as equal members - a practice that stirred up planters' fears of slave revolts. Women also played prominent roles in Separate Baptist church services. The equal position of women and slaves within the Separate Baptist flock challenged the Anglican planters' social and political power over both groups.

Separate Baptist beliefs and practices were an affront to John Waller's privileged social position and to the unsavory pleasures he pursued. So when Lewis Craig was brought before the Spotsylvania County Court in 1766, it hardly seems likely that Waller could have been an impartial juror.

Perhaps fully prepared to convict Craig, Waller was instead mesmerized by the preacher's eloquent defense of himself. Craig addressed the jury: "I thank you, gentlemen of the grand jury, for the honor you have done me. While I was wicked and injurious, you took no notice of me, but since I have altered my course of life and endeavored to reform my neighbors, you concern yourselves much about me."



**Itinerant preachers often baptized dozens of people at each stop on their journey.**

To Waller, Craig possessed astonishing serenity and devotion, and he wondered if he could ever achieve a similar state of grace. He began attending a Separate Baptist church and gave up drinking and gambling, but he despaired of ever achieving religious salvation. One day, after witnessing another person's conversion, he fled into some nearby woods and dropped to his knees, pleading for a sign of divine mercy. Finally it came. "In an instant I felt my heart melt," he later reported, "and a sweet application of the Redeemer's love to my poor soul. The calm was great but short."

In 1767, Waller was baptized and became a Separate Baptist preacher - a religious leader of a group he once despised. It was a choice that would bring him spiritual fulfillment, but at a cost, for in colonial Virginia, Waller's new vocation was a dangerous profession.

Still, Waller's arrest in 1768 did not dampen his eagerness to spread the gospel. After his release from prison, Waller redoubled his efforts to preach and convert others. The Separate Baptist movement was a traveling ministry, and Waller and his fellow preachers held meetings almost every day in Spotsylvania and neighboring counties. The preachers logged hundreds of miles, often on foot, to seek out new members. Despite the scorn of the established church, the Separates' message quickly took root in many parts of Virginia. Hundreds of people would camp out all night to hear Waller and other ministers preach the following day. In sparsely settled regions, people eagerly traveled 100 miles or more to attend their meetings.

Unlike the Anglicans, the Separate Baptists did not baptize children. Instead they believed that baptism should be a voluntary conversion experience reserved for those who were spiritually prepared. The itinerant preachers sometimes baptized as many as 200 during each journey they made. Waller himself would baptize more than 2,000 people into the faith during his career as a minister.

To their critics, the Separate Baptists were a dour, humorless lot who solemnly addressed each other as "Brother" and "Sister." Yet in their church services, the Separate Baptists were anything but melancholy. Unlike the more subdued Anglicans, the Separates expressed their religious devotion with astonishing emotional outbursts. Members cried out, fell to the ground or leapt into the air in a religious frenzy. Some bawled while others barked like dogs, and still others became temporarily paralyzed, so intense was the power of their religious devotion.

To outsiders, they presented an alarming sight in the zeal and fervor of their worshiping. Some observers scoffed that they were merely pretending, but others feared that demons had possessed the Separates. They were, according to a woman who lived near one congregation, an "outlandish set of people."

But it was neither the Separate Baptists' impassioned form of worship nor their earnest, dour manner that alarmed defenders of the traditional order. Instead, it was the Separates' rejection of the hierarchical standards of society, especially their opposition to slavery and their refusal to abide by the law.

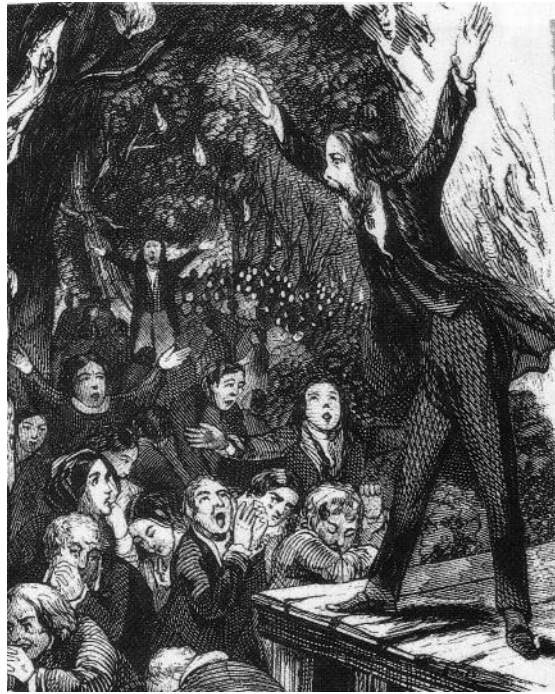
Other Baptist sects and dissenters from the Anglican Church complied with the Act of Toleration of 1689. This act granted dissenters the right to preach if they obtained special licenses from colonial authorities. The Separate Baptists, however, refused to follow this law, firmly believing in their divinely ordained right to preach whenever and wherever they wanted - including the town square.

The courageous resolve of Waller and other preachers brought fierce harassment and persecution. At first, other colonists, rather than government officials, tried to silence these blasphemers of the official church.

As soon as Separate Baptist preachers began to speak, mobs of angry colonists - mostly men - attacked them with clubs or kicked and cuffed them. To disrupt meetings, people threw live snakes and hornets' nests into crowds of listeners gathered around preachers or jeered and shouted at the top of their lungs to drown out the preachers' words. When preachers conducted baptisms by immersing converts in a lake or pond, men on

horseback often rode right into the middle of the baptisms to stop them. Some men dragged the ministers into the water while they were preaching and even tried to drown them.

James Reed, an early Separate Baptist preacher, was once pulled off a stage while preaching and was kicked and beaten by ruffians. Another, Richard Major, was nearly pummeled by a mob until a pair of brothers, who had earlier heard him preach, rescued him. Less fortunate another time, Major was brutally attacked by a man with a club. But he reportedly fended off his assailant with these words: "Satan, I command thee to come out of the man." And the attacker stopped.



**The emotional fervor of Baptist worship services presented an alarming sight to outsiders.**

As the Separate Baptists gained more adherents, assaults against them turned into government-sponsored persecution. Colonial authorities threatened them with arrest as "disturbers of the peace" and ordered them to stop preaching or face imprisonment. The Separates stubbornly refused and went to jail. John Waller was arrested repeatedly and spent more than 100 days in jail for preaching his beliefs.

When the threat of imprisonment failed to deter Separate preachers, Anglican leaders and government officials also turned to violence. In the spring of 1771, as John Waller stood on a stage reciting a psalm in a village in Caroline County, Va., the Anglican minister of the parish, his clerk and the sheriff barged in. With his riding crop, the minister tried to knock Waller's Bible out of his hands, but Waller held on tightly and managed to finish the psalm.

Then, as he began to pray, the minister rammed the butt of his crop into Waller's mouth to silence him. His clerk grabbed Waller and dragged him over to the sheriff. While the clerk held Waller down, the sheriff took a whip and proceeded to give Waller 20 lashes, although he lacked any warrant for his arrest or other authorization to punish him. Bloody and lacerated but undefeated, Waller limped back to his audience and courageously preached a sermon.

All told, some 50 preachers were jailed or attacked during this period of religious turmoil in Virginia. But the Separates could not be beaten into silence. Such persecution only increased their yearnings for religious freedom.

Their belief in religious freedom made the Separate Baptists ardent supporters of the American Revolution. Starting in 1775, while their fellow colonists timidly debated the merits of war, Separate Baptist ministers clamored for independence from Great Britain. They envisioned a new nation in which religious freedom was the law of the land and citizens were no longer compelled to support an established church through taxes.

In fact, the Revolution itself - with its central ideals of liberty and autonomy - created a climate that favored religious freedom. As Virginia moved from colony to state in the newly independent nation, its ties with the "Mother Country," including the Church of England, began to weaken. And the Separate Baptists' long-held hope of religious liberty was finally gaining widespread support.

Now, the Separates had some important allies in their cause. Among them was the influential Virginia leader and future U.S. president James Madison. Like the Separates, Madison believed that people should be free to worship according to the dictates of their conscience.

As a young man, Madison had visited a group of Baptist ministers imprisoned in Culpeper County, Va., for preaching. Shocked by the crude, crowded jail conditions and by such blatant attempts to muffle them, he reportedly promised the preachers, "I shall not be silenced." Still haunted by his visit to the jailhouse, Madison later wrote a friend, "It's a good thing that the Church of England was not established throughout the colonies. That diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages. ... Pray for liberty of conscience."

But Madison did more than pray. Along with Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and another strong proponent of religious liberty, he pushed for legislation to guarantee that freedom. Meanwhile, the Separate Baptists and other religious dissenters circulated petitions throughout the state urging that "the church establishment should be abolished, and religion left to stand upon its own merits, and [that] all religious societies should be protected in the peaceable enjoyment of their own religious principles and modes of worship." This was a clarion call for religious freedom and for the separation of church and state.

It would take another decade of lobbying by Madison and continued pressure from the Baptists and other dissenters, but on January 16, 1786, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom - drafted by Jefferson eight years earlier and submitted by Madison to the General Assembly - became law. The freedom to worship without fear of imprisonment or other legal penalties was now guaranteed to all of Virginia's citizens.

Four years later, Virginia's religious freedom clause would be encoded in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. And the Separate Baptists' long, arduous struggle for religious freedom - a struggle that resulted in the complete separation of church and state - finally bore fruit in that shining beacon of American liberty, the Bill of Rights.

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*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit  
A Place at the Table.*