



Carlyle House

Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

The Great Awakening in Virginia

This is the first in a two part series looking at the Presbyterian Church in Virginia and the life of John Carlyle. Religion played a major role in the lives of Virginians in the eighteenth century and the Anglican Church was at the center as a dominant social and political force. Because John Carlyle was a Presbyterian, religion becomes an interesting facet of his life. In order to fully understand this issue, it is important to look at the evangelical religious movement taking place in the eighteenth century referred to as the Great Awakening.

The Great Awakening was a wave of religious excitement and revivalism that swept across North America beginning in the 1740s. Evangelical ministers traveled throughout the colonies preaching “an immediate personal understanding of religious truth through the joyful acceptance of a gospel of repentance and redemption.” This movement emphasized a religion more personal and passionate than that found in the formal liturgy and printed prayers of Anglicanism. To put this religious fervor into context, it is important to understand the Anglican Church (the Church of England), which was a prominent force in the first three quarters of the eighteenth century in Virginia.

The Anglican Church was firmly established and well organized in Virginia by 1725. Anglican

ministers performed marriages, baptized infants and adults, taught the young, counseled the troubled, comforted the sick, and buried the dead. In addition to the spiritual responsibilities, these Anglican Churches played important civic roles. In fact, the monarch was the head of the Church of England and the church itself was a direct reflection of the colonial government and social hierarchy. According to Rhys Issacs, “The words and forms of action at church clearly asserted

the hierarchical nature of things, confirming definitions of authority within the rural community itself.”

Government officials at all levels had to be members of the Anglican Church. The parish boundaries marked the area ministered by the church, but also became the subdivisions for the administration of the civil

government. As a result, the overlapping responsibilities of government and church, concentrated the political power into the hands of a small group of Virginia leaders.

The vestry, a self-perpetuating panel of powerful men, met periodically to conduct church business,

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The Great Awakening (con't)



which included hiring the parish minister, keeping a record of births and deaths, levying taxes to fund construction and repair for church buildings, pay ministers salaries, and clean up church grounds. The vestry also spent tax money to support the parish poor and to place orphans in the homes of tradesmen who agreed to teach them a trade.

The Anglican Church also played an important social role in Virginia society. Once a week gatherings at the church were an important social event. Phillip Vickers Fithian describes such a gathering, *three grand divisions of time at the Church on Sundays, Viz. before Service giving & receiving letters of business, reading Advertisements, consulting about the price of tobacco, grain, &c. & settling either the lineage, age, of qualities of favorite Horses. 2. In the Church at service, prays read over in haste, a Sermon seldom under and never over twenty minutes, but always made up of sound morality, or deep studied Metaphysicks. 3. After Service is over three quarters of an hour spent in strolling around the Church among the Crowd...[when one might be] invited by several different gentlemen home with them to dinner.* Despite its central role in the social and political life of Virginia, there were still

dissenters who chose not to belong to the Anglican Church. Dissenters, such as Quakers, Presbyterians and Baptists, were those who did not support the doctrine and practices of the Church of England.



Presbyterianism, which had its beginnings from the Scotch-Irish immigration, was a vital force in Virginia during the Great Awakening. The religion's chief founder, John Knox, was living in England during the time when Mary Tudor, a Catholic queen, came to the throne. He fled to Geneva where he was deeply affected by Calvinist beliefs of predestination. In 1559, he returned to Scotland where he urged the country toward its own national religion. The resulting Presbyterian church was a rejection of Rome, but also a rejection of the hierarchical structure of the Anglican Church.

The Presbyterian doctrine is traditionally Calvinistic. Worship is simple, orderly, and dignified, with

an emphasis upon the preaching of the word of God. The structure of the Church is more democratic. In Presbyterianism, the Church is governed by presbyters instead of bishops. Each congregation is administered by elders (both lay and clergy) and a number of congregations join together to form a presbytery. The presbytery is made up of clergy members and elders representing each church within a geographic area. A number of presbyters within a large geographic area form a synod. Many historians feel that "the equality for lay and clergy elders in the administration of the Presbyterian Church was a precursor of equality of citizens of the new nation."

Samuel Davies, an evangelical minister, more than anyone else was responsible for the growth of Presbyterianism in Virginia during the Great Awakening. According to Mark A. Knoll, "His sermons effectively drove home the main themes of revivalistic Calvinism... and unlike some revivalist colleagues, Davies presented his message with rhetorical sophistication." Samuel Davies was also an important political force. He was a skilled and patient negotiator who argued that Presbyterianism was a social stabilizer and that Presbyterians should be free to practice under the Toleration Act of 1711. Davies, a

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strong advocate of the French and Indian War, was a particularly effective orator on behalf of the British cause. So powerful were his oration skills, a young Patrick Henry, who regularly heard Davies speak, was said to have been influenced greatly by what he heard. Despite Davies popularity, he was still limited in what he could accomplish. In dissenting against the Church of England, he was also dissenting against the State of England.

While Presbyterians were not allowed to hold office and were forced to pay taxes to the Church on England, it did not appear as if socially they were ostracized for their beliefs. Phillips Vickers Fithian, the tutor in the home of Robert Carter, was a Presbyterian. In fact, in the year that Fithian stays with the Carters, he was studying to pass an exam to become a Presbyterian minister. Fithian writes about a conversation he has with Mrs. Carter concerning the Anglican and Presbyterian churches, *Mrs. Carter and I after breakfast has a long conversation on religious affairs – particularly on differing denominations of protestants- she thinks the religion of the established church without exception the best of any invented or practiced in the world. & indeed she converses with great propriety on these things & discovers her very extensive knowledge. She allows the difference between the Church*

and Presbyterianism be only exceedingly small, & wishes they were both intirely united. It appears as if religious affiliation does not interfere with Fithian's relationship with the Carters.

In fact during the 1760s, it appears as if Presbyterianism has gained more toleration and respect in the colony. Some historians claim that this is due in part to Samuel Davies' strong support of the French and Indian War in his sermons. Others feel that the government's focus and fears shifted away from Presbyterians and towards the rising evangelical Baptist movement.

Look for next month's article, which will examine how Presbyterianism was a part of John Carlyle's social and political life!

Sources Consulted:

- "The Remarkable Virginia Career of Samuel Davies," by Mark A. Knoll, The Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter, Fall 1998.
- The Transformation of Virginia, by Rhys Issac.
- A Brief History of the Presbyterians, by Lefferts A. Loetscher.
- The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790, by Wesley M. Gewehr.