

From Dissenters to Patriots: Baptists and the American Revolution

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Pastor James Manning of Providence, Rhode Island, wrote to English Baptist leader John Collet Ryland in November 1776, apprising him of the troubles in the American colonies. Two winters before, Providence's Baptists had seen a prodigious revival, with perhaps two hundred people experiencing conversion within just a few months. But Manning thought the outbreak of war in Massachusetts in April 1775 brought an abrupt end to the revival: "the fatal 19th of April, the day of the Lexington battle, like an electric stroke put a stop to the progress of the work, as well as in other places as here. Oh horrid war! How contrary to the spirit of Jesus!"¹

Amidst the travails of war, Baptists saw a glimmer of hope for religious liberty. The Patriots' paeans to liberty might foster freedom in all spheres of life, including religion. Like all Baptists, the Warren Association of Baptists in New England rued the violence of the revolution, yet they also recognized that this was "a day of as great changes and events as perhaps were ever known in this nation. A time when the principles and nature of LIBERTY and GOVERNMENT have been very closely examined into, and wherein there appears the greatest encouragement of obtaining full and universal LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE, that ever has since the first rise of the man of sin [the Roman Catholic Church]." To these Baptists, true religion had suffered for more than a millennium under oppressive state churches, beginning with the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in the fourth century A.D. Now, they speculated, God might use the cataclysm of war to bring about full freedom of conscience.²

¹ James Manning to John Ryland, Nov. 13, 1776, in Reuben Aldridge Guild, *Life, Times, and Correspondence of James Manning* (Boston, 1864), 244.

² *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Warren Association* (Boston, 1776), 7.

Baptists were ambivalent about the American Revolution. Across America they lamented the tribulations of war, knowing that it smothered revival and paralyzed churches. And they recognized that the same Americans who clamored for liberty from Britain often denied religious freedom to dissenting churches. Could the Baptists trust the Patriot leaders? Over the course of the conflict, Baptists became more and more sanguine about its possible consequences. They were convinced that the American Revolution heralded liberty from Britain, but more importantly, liberty for their religion, the true faith of the gospel. And as they accepted the war as a godly cause, they began to see the new American nation as a place uniquely favored by God.

We should remember that rank-and-file Americans, including Baptists, carried on with their daily business even as the great crisis with Britain unfolded around them. In the absence of the instant news coverage we have today, average Americans often did not learn of major developments until days or weeks later. For example, Baptist pastor Hezekiah Smith's solitary journal entry on the weekend of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776 read "something unwell, tho' kept about." Smith was struggling with an intestinal malady he called the "flux," for which he took a number of medicines, including "infusion of rhubarb" and nitre drops, or saltpeter mixed with oil and water.

The war had certainly changed Smith's life, though. Smith was born in 1737 in Hempstead, Long Island, and as a child his family moved to New Jersey. At nineteen he received believer's baptism and became a member of the Baptist congregation at Morristown. In 1762 he graduated from the evangelical College of New Jersey at Princeton. In 1765, he became the pastor at Haverhill Baptist Church in Massachusetts.

When the Revolutionary War began in 1775, many men from Haverhill joined the Continental Army, and Smith became one of first chaplains hired by the Continental Congress. Hundreds of chaplains served in the army; disproportionate numbers of them were evangelicals like Smith. He was stationed with Washington in New York City, although some days the officers were so focused on training troops that he was not allowed to preach. Because of the growing threat of a British assault, Smith stayed with his regiment only occasionally. In August, the great invasion of New York came, with the British army driving Washington and his troops from Manhattan. Smith missed it, having gone to New Jersey to stay with friends and relatives. Smith's delicate health and rambling experiences reflect a larger point about the war: life went on for most Americans during the war, with only certain moments punctuated by excitement, fear, and violence of the conflict.³

Since 1765, Baptists, along with all Americans, had watched the growing turmoil between the colonies and Britain, and wondered what the trouble might portend. In that year, colonists recoiled at a new tax program, the Stamp Act, instituted by Parliament. Under this law, Americans had to pay a duty on the most common printed goods used in the colonies. Even though such a tax was already in effect in England, Americans bristled at the notion that Parliament would pass new revenue laws without the blessing of colonial representatives. Through widespread resistance, the act became unenforceable, and in early 1766 Parliament repealed it.

Samuel Stillman, pastor of Boston's First Baptist Church, rejoiced at the repeal of the Stamp Act. Stillman had experienced conversion and baptism in Charleston, South Carolina, in

³ John David Broome, ed., *The Life, Ministry, and Journals of Hezekiah Smith* (Springfield, Mo., 2004), 439-40.

the 1750s. Stillman worked as a pastor in South Carolina and New Jersey before settling in Boston, where he became pastor of the First Baptist Church in 1765, just before word of the Stamp Act arrived. The town's unruly response to the act confirmed that Bostonians were "tenacious of [their] rights and liberties," as he put it in a sermon celebrating the law's repeal. The Stamp Act might have signaled a growing threat against Americans' most basic liberties, Stillman believed, including religious freedom. But now, the pastor assured his congregation, the repeal heralded a "royal confirmation of your civil and religious liberties; these stand in immediate connection with each other."

The Stamp Act's repeal, approved by King George III, indicated that all was right again in the empire, Stillman thought. The colonists had a deep-seated respect and love for the king that the Stamp Act could not shake. They assumed that he had their best interests at heart: "our most gracious sovereign is the father of his people. . .we, his most faithful subjects in America, have no small share in his royal affections." In England, some whispered that the Americans really meant to pursue independence from Britain, but Stillman would not hear of it--the repeal confirmed that Americans would never have to pursue that option, he said, and that if presented with the possibility of declaring independence, colonists would denounce the prospect. The colonists remained "inviolably attached to his Majesty's most sacred person." This was 1766, and with the happy news of the repeal, there seemed no more reason to doubt that the American union with Britain would go on indefinitely.⁴

In spiritual terms, the years leading up to the American Revolution were a time of growth and strength for the Baptist movement. In New England, Baptists sought greater respectability,

⁴ Samuel Stillman, *Good News from a Far Country* (Boston, 1766), 7, 31-34.

especially through the establishment of their first college, the College of Rhode Island (later Brown University). The key figures in the establishment of the College of Rhode Island were James Manning and Isaac Backus. The Separate Baptists, unlike those affiliated with the Philadelphia Association, viewed educational requirements for pastors with suspicion. Most of the early Separate Baptists, including Backus, did not have a college education, and the Separates believed that the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit was the essential qualification needed to preach. Requiring a college degree for pastors seemed to denigrate the role of spiritual calling, for God would presumably call whomever he wanted, regardless of their worldly credentials. The Baptists looked to the example of Christ's apostles, some of whom were untutored fishermen.

Nevertheless, Baptist leaders in the 1760s came to believe that Baptists needed a college to train pastors. None of the Baptists opposed education *per se*, and many accepted the idea that specialized education in theology could help develop better pastors. They worried that some aspiring pastors might go to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, and be tempted to become Congregationalists or Presbyterians. Baptists also hoped that if they became a more respectable denomination with educated pastors, colonial religious authorities would have a harder time justifying the Baptists' mistreatment.

In the early 1760s, Manning and Backus began to develop plans for the college, in concert with certain non-Baptists, including Congregationalist pastor Ezra Stiles of Newport, Rhode Island. Rhode Island was friendly to the Baptists because of its longstanding policy of religious freedom, and the colony also had no college at that point. So in 1764 the College of Rhode Island was opened in Warren, Rhode Island.

Some Separate Baptists were appalled by the college's founding, thinking that Backus, a college trustee, had betrayed them in the name of respectability. Backus countered that Baptists needed this kind of school to help train more effective pastors, but he admitted that there was a danger in associating education with godliness. Baptists should "never imagine to confine Christ or his church, to that, or any other human school for ministers," he cautioned. Manning struck a similar tone, and by the time the college moved to its permanent home in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1770, the school had become widely acceptable among New England and Philadelphia-area Baptists.⁵

The growing similarities between the New England Separate Baptists and those of the Philadelphia Association were enhanced by the founding of the Warren Association in 1767. Manning also spearheaded the founding of this association, which was modeled after the Philadelphia Association and signaled the Separates' increasing sophistication. As with the College of Rhode Island, some radical Separates viewed the association with suspicion, fearing that it could aspire to wield coercive authority over Baptist churches. But Manning and others insisted that the association would serve primarily as an advisory body, and a coordinator of efforts on behalf of religious liberty. It would allow the Separates to become, as they put it, "important in the eye of the civil powers." By founding the college and the Warren Association, the New England Baptists hoped to achieve the kind of serious reputation commanded by the Philadelphia Association. If they did, surely persecution would stop.⁶

⁵ "I cannot see" quote in Thomas Green to Ebenezer Hinds, Sept. 1, 1766, quoted in C.C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* rev. ed. (Middletown, CT, 1987), 276; Backus quoted in Kidd, "Becoming Respectable," 59.

⁶ Warren Association, *The Sentiments and Plan of the Warren Association* (Germantown, Pa., 1769), 3.

Efforts to cultivate respectability did not immediately garner universal respect, nor was the goal of respect embraced by all Separates. In Ashfield, Massachusetts, in 1770, town authorities seized hundreds of acres of land from Baptists who had refused to pay to support the local Congregational church. In response to Baptist protests, Ashfield authorities asserted that the Baptists' claims to natural rights were "wholly superseded in this case by civil obligations and in matters of taxation individuals cannot with the least propriety plead them." Ashfield was parroting the British reply to the Americans' argument for no taxation without representation. Ashfield's seizure of property, however, was so egregious that the Warren Association ironically appealed to King George III, who annulled the law enabling the confiscation. This episode made many New England Baptists wonder whether their liberties were safer under colonial authorities or the King of England. Ashfield's Baptist minister told the Sons of Liberty, the American leaders of resistance, that they did not deserve their name: they only wanted "liberty from oppression that they might have liberty to oppress!"⁷

The most spectacular instances of persecution against the Baptists in the decade prior to the War for Independence came in Virginia. Aggressive evangelism and unwillingness to comply with regulations of the established church made the Virginia Baptists seem like revolutionaries. Numerous Baptists faced beatings and imprisonment for illegal preaching. Samuel Harris, one of the early converts of Sandy Creek, North Carolina's Daniel Marshall, became known as the "Virginia Apostle" because of his heart-piercing preaching. But his meetings attracted unwanted

⁷ Town of Ashfield quoted in William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 1: 539; Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists* (Newton, Mass., 1871), 2: 153-159; Ashfield pastor quoted in Preserved Smith, "Chronicles of a New England Family," *New England Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Sept. 1936): 424.

attention, too. In one instance in Orange County, Virginia, a man dragged Harris down from his pulpit “and hauled him about, sometimes by the hand, sometimes by the leg, and sometimes by the hair of his head,” an early Baptist historian recalled. Harris’s supporters rumbled with his attackers, and friends hid Harris in a nearby house, where he took refuge in a hidden attic.⁸

Likewise, in Culpeper, Virginia, itinerant James Ireland was arrested and jailed. Some of his followers came to hear him preach through the cell grate, but opponents drove them away. A number of Ireland’s African American devotees were whipped for coming to see him. Ireland’s enemies would not relent, and some burned brimstone and “Indian pepper” at the cell door, hoping to suffocate him. Some of his tormentors even urinated on him. All told, about thirty four Baptist preachers were jailed in Virginia in the 1760s and 1770s.⁹

Despite their poor relations with some of the colonial governments, most Baptists in America did eventually support independence. One of the most influential Baptist voices of resistance against Britain was also one of the most unlikely: the English Baptist pastor John Allen. In 1772, Allen arrived in Boston, having fallen into debt and legal problems in London, where he had lost his pastoral position in 1767. In 1769 Allen was charged with forging a promissory note, and despite being acquitted, he felt that he needed a fresh start in America. He preached on trial at Boston’s Second Baptist Church. Some members doubted his qualifications, but church records show that “a number of gentlemen were desirous to hear him (Sons of Liberty).” The Sons of Liberty, leaders of the resistance against Britain, saw Allen as an

⁸ David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination* (Boston, 1813): 2: 332, 336-337.

⁹ Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT, 2007), 248.

emerging advocate for America's God-given rights. When the details of Allen's legal troubles became known, he lost a chance to work at Second Baptist. Instead, he became one of the most popular advocates for American resistance against Britain when he published *An Oration Upon the Beauties of Liberty*, originally delivered as a sermon at Second Baptist.¹⁰

Allen's *Oration* was printed in five editions across four cities, and seized upon the furor created by the burning of the British customs ship *Gaspee* in Rhode Island in 1772. Some Rhode Islanders proposed, preposterously, that Native Americans had perpetrated the attack, but everyone knew that Rhode Island merchants were behind the burning. The British government, becoming increasingly exasperated at the colonists, suggested that they might bring suspects to England for trial, assuming that no American jury would convict their peers. But colonists, led by Allen, protested that depriving the colonists of the right of a jury trial by one's peers violated one of their most basic liberties.

Allen escalated the stakes of the crisis much further than most American writers in 1773, who typically blamed corrupt bureaucrats around King George III for causing the trouble in America. But Allen pointed at the king himself, arguing that when the king sanctioned the violation of the colonists' legal rights, he abrogated his right to rule over them. Allen referenced the touchy subject of King Charles I's execution by Parliamentarians in 1649, and suggested that King George III might meet the same fate. "I reverence and love my king," Allen wrote, "but I revere the rights of an Englishman before the authority of any king upon the earth. I distinguish greatly between a king and a tyrant, a king is the guardian and trustee of the rights and laws of the people, but a tyrant destroys them." This was heady, seditious stuff, as three years ahead of

¹⁰ John M. Bumsted and Charles E. Clark, "New England's Tom Paine: John Allen and the Spirit of Liberty,"

William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 21, no. 4 (October 1964): 562–565.

time Allen anticipated Thomas Paine's final rejection of King George III's authority in 1776's *Common Sense*.¹¹

The Baptist reaction to the Revolution paired focus on the rebellion with the quest to win full religious liberty. No one better exemplified the blend of support for the Patriot cause and religious reform than Isaac Backus. Backus, the Baptists, and other evangelical dissenters pressured the New England governments for relief from supporting the established Congregationalist church. Backus knew that the crisis with Britain represented a unique opportunity for disestablishment, because Americans' campaign for liberty would be hypocritical if they continued to deny other Americans their own freedom. (Others made this same argument, even more pointedly, with regard to slavery.) In his 1773 *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*, Backus asked how anyone could "reasonably expect that he who has the hearts of kings in his hand, will turn the heart of our earthly sovereign [King George III] to hear the pleas for liberty, of those who will not hear the cries of their fellow-subjects, under their oppressions?"¹²

The First Continental Congress in Philadelphia presented an opportunity for the Baptists to appeal directly to American leaders for religious liberty. The Continental Congress began meeting in September 1774 in reaction to the Coercive Acts, which shut down the Massachusetts government and blocked Boston Harbor to ship traffic. Parliament passed these in response to the Boston Tea Party of late 1773, in which loads of British East India Company tea were dumped into Boston harbor. Backus and the Warren Association not only distributed copies of

¹¹ John Allen, *An Oration Upon the Beauties of Liberty* (New London, 1773), in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805* 2d ed. (Indianapolis, 1998), 1: 307.

¹² Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty* (Boston, 1773), in Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons*, 1: 362.

An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty to the members of the Congress, but they also sent Backus and James Manning to Philadelphia to lobby for their cause.

In a meeting in October, Backus, Manning, and other Baptist pastors conferred with leaders of the Massachusetts delegation, including the distant cousins Samuel and John Adams. The Baptists presented their case for religious liberty and disestablishing the state church. But Samuel and John Adams were unsympathetic and asserted that the burdens of the establishment were so light as to hardly matter. Backus threw the Ashfield episode in their face, to show just how oppressive the established church could be. Samuel Adams became indignant at Backus, and “more than once insinuated that these complaints came from enthusiasts who made a merit of suffering persecution, and also that enemies to these colonies had a hand therein.” The Massachusetts delegates ended the meeting by promising to keep the Baptists’ grievances in mind, but John Adams said that “we might as well expect a change in the solar system, as to expect they would give up their establishment.” This was a disappointing meeting that heralded years of failure for the Baptists of New England--although active persecution did stop, Massachusetts would keep a form of religious establishment through 1833, when the state finally became so pluralistic that even the Congregationalists became willing to abandon their position as the official church.¹³

With this kind of reaction from John and Samuel Adams, it is not surprising that many Baptists balked at cooperating with the rebellion against Britain. Congregationalist pastor and leading Patriot Ezra Stiles of Newport, Rhode Island, surveyed America’s denominations in 1774 and worried the most about the Baptists’ and pacifist Quakers’ commitment to resistance against Britain. “Though some few Baptists and Quakers are heartily with us, yet too many are so much

¹³ Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence, RI, 1979), 2: 916-917.

otherwise, that was all America of their temper or coolness in the cause the Parliament would easily carry their points and triumph over American liberty.”¹⁴

Stiles was particularly convinced that James Manning was “against his country in heart, and a Tory only “affecting neutrality.” Stiles believed that Manning never prayed for the success of Washington’s army until a visit by George Washington to his church forced the duty upon him. Stiles, somewhat paranoid about the Baptists’ intentions, reported every rumor about Manning that he could gather. It was probably true, as Stiles noted, that Manning wondered whether he and the Baptists could trust Congregationalist and Anglican Patriots who had so routinely persecuted them. But as a Patriot, Stiles had no patience for this kind of reluctance from “bigoted Baptist politicians.”¹⁵

As with John Allen, some Baptists, convinced of the rectitude of the American case against Britain, became actively involved in promoting the Revolution among their brethren. For example, Reverend Oliver Hart of Charleston was enlisted by the South Carolina government to go on a recruiting campaign through the backcountry to convince reluctant settlers to embrace the Revolution. Hart traveled with Presbyterian minister William Tennent III through the central part of the colony in the summer of 1775, and Hart found that the message of American resistance was not universally welcomed. One of Hart’s hosts, Reverend Philip Mulkey of the Fairforest Baptist Church, had sided with the British, yet he allowed Hart to speak to his ambivalent congregation on the subject of the war. Some apparently thought that Bostonians had recklessly stirred the conflict, and one said he did not care if “1000 Bostonians might be killed in battle.” Overall, Hart found the Carolina settlers to be “obstinate and irritated to an extreme,” and

¹⁴ Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York, 1901), 1: 491.

¹⁵ Dexter, ed., *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 2: 23.

suspicious of the Patriot leaders' motivations. But Hart and Tennent ultimately did convince a number of South Carolinians to pledge their loyalty to the provincial government in the fight against Britain.¹⁶

Backcountry resistance reflected widespread skepticism among pioneer settlers about the colonies' political leadership. Among the Separate Baptists, there also existed a remarkable strain of pacifism. Some of the Baptist ministers associated with the Sandy Creek churches in North Carolina warned their congregations that anyone fighting for either side of the Revolution would face excommunication. Pastor Erasmus Kelly of First Baptist Church, Newport, Rhode Island, also argued that it was not legitimate for Christians to take up arms in any case, although he conceded that if any situation demanded armed violence, it was this one. He also prayed publicly for the success of American forces.¹⁷

Other pacifist Baptists were not so friendly toward the Patriots. James Miles of Cross Roads Meeting House near the Haw River in North Carolina went on a tirade against the deceitful Patriot leaders and recruiters: he said to "show him a great man with a half moon in his hat with liberty written upon it and his hat full of feathers. . .and he would show you a devil and that poor men were bowing and scraping to them, and [the Patriots] leading them to hell as soon as they had come from the Congress." These charlatans, Miles continues, "were blow'd up as big as a blather and that he did not value the Congress nor the Committee [of Correspondence] no more than as [a] parcel of raccoon dogs for he got his [commands] from the King and the field officers got their [commands] from hell or the Devil." The Patriot leaders of North and South

¹⁶ Oliver Hart diary transcription, Aug. 10-11, 1775, in South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina; Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 292-293.

¹⁷ Dexter, ed., *Literary Diary*, 2: 29.

Carolina understandably worried that this kind of Loyalist, pacifist sentiment might capture the hearts of backcountry Baptists.¹⁸

Unlike James Miles, some of the Baptists of the backcountry enthusiastically supported the Revolution, most notably the young pastor Richard Furman of the High Hills of Santee Church, who would later replace Oliver Hart as pastor of Charleston's First Baptist Church. Furman, reared as an Anglican, experienced conversion and received believer's baptism when he was sixteen, and almost immediately began preaching at High Hills of Santee, in eastern South Carolina. When fighting commenced in South Carolina in late 1775, Furman penned a letter on behalf of the Patriot cause. Furman argued that Parliament had repeatedly acted against the colonists' rights, especially by passing unfair taxes and asserting their legal supremacy over America. He also excoriated Parliament for sanctioning the 1774 Quebec Act, which allowed the free practice of Catholicism in British Canada. Furman and many other commentators played on the American colonists' intense anti-Catholicism and painted the Quebec Act as a particularly ominous portent. "They have broken the principles of the [British] constitution, by taking away the power of our assemblies, and by establishing Popery, contrary to law, in one of the provinces, which gives us reason to suspect, they have a design to impose the same upon other provinces; at least they claim that power." To Furman, the Americans had to resist, lest they lose both their political and religious liberty. Patriot commander Richard Richardson of High Hills took

¹⁸ Miles quoted in Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 213-214.

Furman's letter and distributed it among backcountry settlers in a December 1775 campaign to retake a key fort at Ninety Six, South Carolina, from Loyalist allies of Britain.¹⁹

Furman's advocacy for the Patriot cause made him a target for the British. He had to flee the state in 1780 as the war there turned against the Patriots. In May, Charleston fell to the British after a terrible siege, with the loss of 5000 American troops--their worst defeat of the war. Then in August, Patriot troops suffered another humiliation at Camden, South Carolina, which was uncomfortably close to High Hills of Santee. Furman took his family and sought refuge in north-central North Carolina, near the Virginia line. Here he continued to itinerate and preach, and in his travels Furman met and became friends with Patrick Henry, the great Patriot orator of Virginia, whose home was close by in Virginia. Furman returned to the High Hills Church in 1782, and in 1787 accepted a call to become pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston.²⁰

Although a number of Baptists refused to support the Patriot cause, most Baptists believed that the Americans' grievances against Britain were compelling. The Separate Baptists of Virginia declared in 1775 that although they had many religious differences with their fellow Americans, they shared the same political cause of liberty. They advised "military resistance against Great Britain in her unjust invasion, tyrannical oppression, and repeated hostilities," and permitted Virginia Baptists to take up arms. The Philadelphia Association adopted a more muted tone, worrying over the "awful impending calamities" of war and recommending that

¹⁹ Richard Furman, "An Address to the Residents Between the Broad and Saluda Rivers Concerning the American War for Independence, November, 1775," in James A. Rogers, *Richard Furman: Life and Legacy* (Macon, Ga., 2001), 271; also *ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ Rogers, *Furman*, 40-42.

congregations hold days of fasting to pray for God's help and forgiveness for America's provoking sins.²¹

The war did hold awful impending calamities for many Americans, including Baptists. Numerous churches were damaged, disrupted, and scattered by the conflict. Charleston's First Baptist Church essentially ceased to function for two years after the city fell to the British. Their popular pastor Oliver Hart fled for New Jersey and never returned to the South. The British reportedly used Charleston's Baptist meetinghouse for storage. Without securing the help of the talented Richard Furman, one wonders whether Charleston would have maintained its historic influence in Baptist circles after the war. Baptist churches elsewhere felt the heavy hand of the war, too. The Seventh-Day Baptist congregation of Shrewsbury, New Jersey, for example, apparently stopped meeting for about two and a half years between 1778 and 1781. The war also caused years of delay in erecting a new building for the Shrewsbury church.²²

One of the most poignant scenes of the war transpired at the small Baptist church in Cambridge, New York. In 1777 the British sent a massive army to invade upstate New York, and as the British approached Cambridge and nearby Bennington, Vermont, many church members at Cambridge doubted that the Continental Army could withstand the fearsome foe. So a number of them defected to the British side the night before the battle, and the British forced some of them to serve in their army. "During the bloody conflict," a Baptist historian recalled, "the heavens and earth witnessed the shocking spectacle of brethren, who, but a few days before had

²¹ "Journal of Convention, August 16, 1775," in Charles F. James, ed., *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, Va., 1900), 52; "Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association" (1776), in A.D. Gillette, ed., *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1707 to 1807* (Springfield, Mo., 2002), 155.

²² Leah Townsend, *South Carolina Baptists, 1670-1805* (Florence, SC, 1935), 27; on the Shrewsbury church, S. Scott Rohrer, *Wandering Souls: Protestant Migrations in America, 1630-1865* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010), 179-180.

set together at the table of the Lord, arranged in direful hostility against each other, amidst the clangor of arms and the rage of battle. Brother fighting against brother! Such are the horrors and unnatural effects of war!” This wrenching experience ruined the church, and when the pastor returned in 1778, he could only find three members left with whom to hold meetings. Like many Baptist churches in the area, however, Cambridge’s soon experienced revival again. By 1780, the membership stood at a robust 140.²³

As seen at Cambridge, New York, even the worst depredations of war could not permanently douse Baptist revival, and New England saw a remarkable season of awakenings in the later stages of the Revolution. This revival became known as the “New Light Stir.” The New Light Stir was punctuated by New England’s “Dark Day” of May 19, 1780, when much of the region fell under an eerie, smoky pall. The gloom was apparently quite stark, as birds returned to their roosts early, thinking it was night. Forest fires in Canada likely produced the darkness, but many in New England interpreted as a sign from God, and a possible harbinger of the return of Christ.

The fright caused by the Dark Day energized a new season of revival among the Baptists. One pastor reported from Connecticut that the “Sabbath after the late uncommon darkness I observed uncommon attention and solemnity among the people.” A new sense of religious seriousness had begun at Middleborough’s Third Baptist Church in March 1780, and by the end of May, Pastor Asa Hunt wrote that “God is doing wonders amongst us.” At a meeting after regular worship, a group of converts retired to Hunt’s house for more singing and prayer, and the session reached heights of spiritual ecstasy that Hunt had never seen. He likened it to the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit had originally been poured out on believers. “Such rejoicing of

²³ David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (Boston, 1813), 1: 551-552.

saints and cries of sinners I never heard,” he wrote. Between May and July, Hunt’s tiny church baptized fifty-four new converts.²⁴

Hunt’s church also produced the most remarkable Baptist enlistee in the Continental Army: Deborah Sampson, who posed as a man in order to serve. Sampson joined Third Baptist Middleborough as the revival was winding down. She was a schoolteacher in Middleborough, and would have had to give a testimony of conversion in order to join the church. She did not tarry long with the Baptists, however, as she attempted to join the army under false pretences in the spring of 1782 and ran afoul of the congregation for doing so.²⁵

Minutes from September 3, 1782, recorded the church’s consideration of the case: “Deborah Sampson, a member of the church who last Spring was accused of dressing in men’s clothes and enlisting as a soldier in the army, and although she was not convicted, yet was strongly suspected of being guilty, and for sometime before behaved very loose and un-Christian like, and at last left our parts in a secret manner.” The church withdrew fellowship from Sampson, who subsequently joined the army as “Robert Shurtliff.” She served for seventeen months, surviving grievous battle wounds in New York in 1782, and was honorably discharged in 1783.²⁶

Isaac Backus believed that the revival of 1779-81 had produced dramatic results, not only for the Baptists, but for America generally. He considered it the most powerful spiritual event since the heyday of the Great Awakening in the 1740s, and estimated that 2000 New Englanders

²⁴ Biel Ledoyt to Isaac Backus, June 13, 1780, Papers of Isaac Backus; Backus, *History of New England*, 2: 272 n.1.

²⁵ Alfred F. Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York, 2004), 72-80.

²⁶ Young, *Masquerade*, 86-87.

had received believer's baptism in the year 1780 alone. Backus thought it came not a moment too soon for America, as the awakening "was undoubtedly a great means of saving this land from foreign invasion, and from ruin by internal corruption."²⁷

Backus did not explain this remarkable claim, but his assessment reflected a broader trend among Baptists: as the Revolutionary War progressed, many Baptists began to identify newly independent America as a nation specially blessed by God and his workings of Providence. Sometimes this belief was forged by Baptists' intense experiences in the war itself. For example, chaplain Hezekiah Smith traveled with General Horatio Gates' Continental troops as they faced the lumbering army of British General John Burgoyne in New York in Fall 1777 (the campaign that wrecked the Baptist church at Cambridge, New York). Burgoyne brought an army of 8000 men southward out of Canada into New York. A successful operation would have strategically isolated New England and probably ended the American rebellion.

Smith prayed with and ministered to American troops during the campaign, and he watched as a "very warm battle" took place on September 19, the Battle of Freeman's Farm. During this battle, Burgoyne tried to flank the American position at Bemis Heights, only to face fierce resistance by troops under the command of the future traitor, General Benedict Arnold. On October 7, the Americans counter-attacked against Burgoyne's army, and as Smith put it, "drove the enemy into their works." Finally, Burgoyne's demoralized army surrendered to Gates on October 17. This was probably the most significant American victory during the war, and in his next Sabbath sermon Smith captured the moment with a reflection on Exodus 15:2, "The Lord is

²⁷ Backus, *History of New England*, 264-265.

my strength and song, and he is become my salvation.” This text was from Moses and the Israelites’ celebration after God drowned the pursuing Egyptian army in the Red Sea.²⁸

Smith’s exuberance regarding Saratoga only grew over time. On the two-year anniversary of the battle, Smith preached to his brigade and memorialized what he called, remarkably, “the grandest conquest ever gained since the creation of the world.” He told the assembly that the victory at Saratoga should remind them of “another conquest, which so far exceeds the one now mentioned as scarcely to admit of comparison,” Christ’s victory over sin and death in his resurrection from the dead. Strange as it might seem for a pastor to say so, Smith concluded that it was proper for Christians to juxtapose Saratoga and the resurrection, “the one affording the happy prospect of earthly felicity, the other the most pleasing hope of celestial happiness.” Smith’s striking conflation was an early example of some Baptists’ tendency to blend American history with the Christian history of redemption.²⁹

In the heat of war Chaplain Smith joined other Baptists (and Christians from other denominations) such as Philadelphia’s William Rogers in making a tight connection between the success of American arms and the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. Rogers was the first student at the Baptists’ College of Rhode Island, and in 1772 he became pastor at First Baptist Church in Philadelphia. But like Hezekiah Smith, Rogers left his pastorate and became a chaplain in the Continental Army. Rogers worked as brigade chaplain to Pennsylvania troops. In 1779 the brigade joined General John Sullivan’s campaign against the Iroquois Indians of New York, who had allied with the British.

²⁸ Broome, ed., *Life, Ministry, and Journals*, 452-454.

²⁹ Reuben A. Guild, *Chaplain Smith and the Baptists* (Philadelphia, 1885), 226-230.

Like many Anglo-Americans, Rogers was disgusted with the British for allying with the Iroquois, whom he considered utterly barbaric. He wondered how any American could countenance loyalty to a government that, as he saw it, had commissioned Native Americans to torture and murder white colonists. (Rogers failed to note that frontier settlers had committed their share of outrages against Indians.) On Sunday, July 4, 1779, Rogers preached to the troops on Psalm 32:10, “he that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about.” In a rousing conclusion to the sermon, Rogers reminded the men that “Our fathers trusted and the Lord did deliver them; they cried unto Him and were delivered; they trusted in Him and were not confounded. Even so may it be with us, for the sake of Christ Jesus, who came to give freedom to the world.” With these words ringing in their heads, the troops proceeded on the campaign, during which they burned forty Iroquois towns, destroying their crops and orchards.³⁰

The growing Baptist enthusiasm for the newly independent United States was perhaps best expressed in by the Warren Association in 1784. The war had ended at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781, when George Washington’s army caught Lord Cornwallis, the British commander, in a pincer movement with French warships recently arrived in Chesapeake Bay. Then in 1783, American diplomats secured very favorable terms for their nation in the Treaty of Paris. Americans basked in the wonderful victory, which to most observers seemed guided by the hand of Providence. James Manning had received the news of the war’s beginning with much trepidation, but now he and Isaac Backus heralded its conclusion as a sign from heaven. “The American Revolution, which has been accomplished by many astonishing interpositions of Providence. . .stands closely connected with many others, which will take place in their order,

³⁰ Frederick Cook, ed., *Journals of the Military Expedition of Major General John Sullivan* (Auburn, NY, 1887), 250, 252.

and unite in one glorious end, even the advancement and completion of the Redeemer's kingdom," they exulted. "Nor is it at all improbable, that America is reserved in the mind of Jehovah, to be the grand theater on which the divine Redeemer will accomplish glorious things." They hoped that the American victory over tyranny would be followed quickly by its logical outcome: the establishing of full religious liberty. In some places, such as Virginia, they would enjoy fabulous success in securing religious freedom, as highlighted by the adoption of Thomas Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in 1786; in others, such as Massachusetts, real change was slow to come. But still, Baptists in America had come quite a way from their dissenting English roots and days as colonial outlaws. The travails of the Revolution had helped these Baptists to become Americans.³¹

³¹ Warren Association, *Minutes of the Warren Association* (Boston?, 1784), 6-7.