

RELUCTANT REVOLUTIONARIES:  
THE PHILADELPHIA BAPTIST ASSOCIATION  
AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Former Philadelphia Pastor Morgan Edwards had spent the past few years visiting churches in the colonies from Nova Scotia to Georgia as an evangelist and historian. Preaching before the annual meeting of the Philadelphia Baptist Association on October 12, 1773, he used Numbers 23:9 as his text. Balaam says of Israel in this passage, "lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations."<sup>1</sup> Edwards interpreted "standing alone and unreckoned among the nations" as maintaining a religious "singularity," which he attributed to "the Baptists from the beginning of Christianity to the present time." Edwards concluded, "Standing alone and unnumbered with any religious society, is, in some supposable cases, a commendable and blessed thing."<sup>2</sup> As a scholar of Hebrew and Greek, Edwards was likely well aware of the meaning of the Hebrew word "chashab," translated "reckoned" in his text. It not only means to regard, think, or number, but also to plait, interpenetrate, or weave.<sup>3</sup> In applying this passage to his own people,

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PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 74, NO. 2, 2007.  
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Edwards praised them for remaining separate from and unmixed with the corrupt outside world.

An open examination of the Philadelphia Baptist Association's history, however, reveals evidence of a much different outlook. Especially over the second half of the eighteenth century, it exchanged a significant degree of "singularity" for a prominent position in an emerging nation. The association minutes, along with secondary and other primary sources, reveal a pattern of transition. They came to be "reckoned among the nations." In other words, they had assimilated both religiously and politically. They became increasingly willing to set aside doctrinal differences and communicate with other religious groups, and in the American Revolution they confirmed their journey from apolitical Welsh immigrants to patriotic Americans. Had the association's practice remained consistent with the message in Edwards's text, the subsequent history of American Baptists would have been strikingly different;

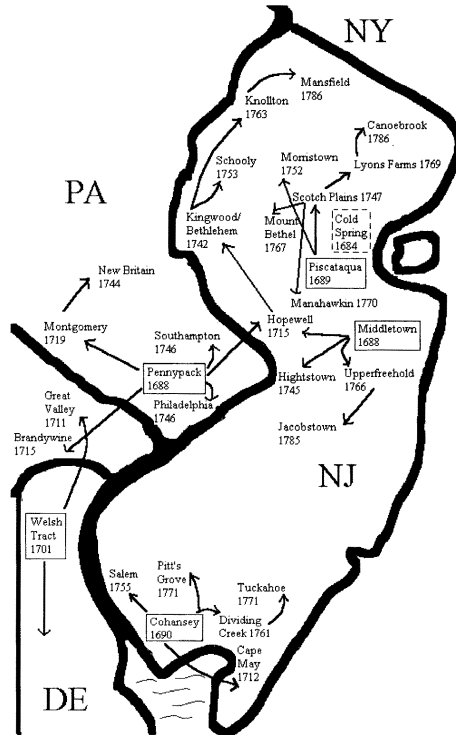


FIGURE 1: This map is a compilation of data from primary and secondary sources created by the author. Dates sometimes vary slightly between sources, and some locations are approximations. Boxes surround the original PBA members. See endnote 3.

they would not have entered the next century as one of the fastest-growing denominations in the flowering civil religion. Had Philadelphia Baptists instead refused to compromise their singularity, they likely would have ended up withdrawing increasingly from the mainstream rather than merging with it, and the history of American religion would have been quite different. But the Philadelphia Baptist Association *did* become “reckoned among the nations,” and the process by which this occurred offers a valuable lesson in the relationship between religion, society, and politics. A crucial part of that larger story is the organization’s reaction to the American Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1960s, Alan Heimert attempted to draw a link between the New Light evangelicals of the Great Awakening and the patriots of the American Revolution. Responding to heavy criticism of Heimert’s thesis, several historians attempted to salvage some of it by toning down its claims. But other historians have broken more completely with Heimert’s ideas. Mark Noll saw the relationship between American Christianity and revolution as reciprocal and emphasized the impact of politics on religion in *Christians in the American Revolution*. He pointed out that the two sometimes clashed, for example, over contradictory definitions of liberty, submission to authority, and human nature itself.<sup>5</sup> Following in Noll’s path, I argue that eighteenth-century religion and politics were by no means natural allies; complex problems had to be overcome before the two could cooperate. Methodists, Quakers, and Anglicans were not the only religious groups to question the Revolution. The PBA settled several divisive issues in the decades prior to revolution; others continued until then, presenting obstacles to cooperation in the patriotic cause.

The PBA began in 1707 with an annual meeting of delegates representing churches in eastern Pennsylvania, northern Delaware, and New Jersey. A table in the association minutes for 1764 reports the “original state” of the thirty-one churches that had joined the association so far. The churches normally started out small; the total membership of churches at the time they joined the association varied between three and fifty-six. Eleven churches had joined before 1740, six had joined in the 40s, ten had joined in the 50s, and four had joined since 1760. Of these, all but eight were located inside Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey.<sup>6</sup> Delegates to the association met annually to report the state of their respective churches, deliberate on queries, and supply vacant pulpits with ministers. The association was only an advisory body with no power to dictate church policy. Philadelphia-region Baptists were predominately Welsh immigrants who had come to America

late in the seventeenth century to escape persecution.<sup>7</sup> Some Baptists in other areas of colonial America were of English descent and had closer ties to Congregationalists and English General Baptists. Unlike the more Arminian General Baptists, the Particular Baptists who settled the Philadelphia area were Calvinistic.

Mark Noll has observed the inconsistency between republican ideology and the "five points of Calvinism." The doctrines of "total depravity" and "unconditional election" deny man's ability to shape his own destiny, "limited atonement" is undemocratic, "irresistable grace" implies absolute power, and "perseverance of the saints" gives God the credit for sustaining believers instead of the believers themselves.<sup>8</sup> Given these considerations, the theology of the Particular Baptists of Philadelphia must have presented obstacles to the ideology of the American Revolution. As seen in the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, the PBA was strongly Calvinistic.<sup>9</sup> It had encouraged compromise with the slightly Arminian Separate Baptists, but the revolutionary optimism concerning mankind's potential to change the world more closely resembled Universalism.<sup>10</sup> Could they assimilate politically without their theology being undermined? While patriotism did not necessarily lead to this doctrinal extreme, converts to Universalism present an example of what *could* happen when the unbridled spread of republican ideology leaked into the realm of theology.

Several pastors demonstrated the PBA's vulnerability by becoming Universalists following the Revolution. Soon after replacing William Rogers as Philadelphia pastor (Rogers had resigned to serve as an army chaplain), Elhanan Winchester divided the church in 1781 over his profession of Universalist sentiments before his ultimate removal.<sup>11</sup> But Winchester was not the only Universalist minister to infiltrate the PBA. Winchester and John Murray both organized Universalist societies in Philadelphia, and in 1790 they held a convention to unite their followers in the area. To the association's dismay, seven ministers attended the convention, three of them pastors of Kingwood, Cape May, and Pittsgrove in New Jersey. The defection divided those churches and spread to others as the association made repeated attempts to stifle the movement.<sup>12</sup> A 1788 query from Cape May asked, "Whether a member, who professes that Christ died for all mankind, and that every individual of the human race will finally be saved, ought to be excommunicated?" The association answered in the affirmative.<sup>13</sup> In the 1790 circular letter the association lamented and denounced "the leprosy of universal salvation" in no uncertain terms.<sup>14</sup> And yet the leprosy continued to spread in the 1780s and 90s. Norman Maring says that four out of fifteen New Jersey pastors became

Universalists in 1790, and that the doctrine infiltrated at least eight of the twenty-four churches in the state before subsiding.<sup>15</sup>

The PBA shared with most other American colonists a deep respect for the English crown prior to the Revolution. In 1756, facing the French threat to the west, it encouraged its members to “fear God, and honor the king by every expression of duty and loyalty, seeing our nation and land are in danger by a potent enemy.”<sup>16</sup> This submission to authority is not surprising given the literal interpretation of scripture that the PBA typically practiced.<sup>17</sup> British attachments are evident in the Philadelphia church’s plea to England for John Gill’s help in finding a pastor and in the invitation it extended to Morgan Edwards, who preached “A Tear for George II” the previous year upon the death of his beloved king. In his “Millennium,” he praised George II for tolerance of his premillennialist views.<sup>18</sup> As Gordon Wood has pointed out, however, such deference was increasingly challenged during the eighteenth century. In addition to social betters and fathers, he writes, “Even the authority of the supreme father of all, God himself, was not immune to challenge . . . If even God was losing his absolute right to rule, the position of all earthly rulers necessarily became less secure.”<sup>19</sup> The PBA made no outward signs of political rebellion before the 1770s, but earlier signs can be found of indirect Puritan influence on its ideas concerning monarchical authority by way of marriage and divorce.

Roderick Phillips has pointed out that since the English Civil War the Puritan republicans had defended political rebellion by comparing oppressive monarchs to abusive husbands, arguing for the right of subjects to “divorce” their rulers. Royalists, on the other hand, insisted that just as marriage was indissoluble except by death, so the law of God bound subjects to their political leaders.<sup>20</sup> With their commitment to contractual rights, the Puritans who settled in New England adopted some of the most liberal divorce policies of the time. Divorce was legal in Massachusetts from 1639, over two centuries before the reform of England’s divorce policy.<sup>21</sup> Colonial divorce legislation was one of many issues leading up to revolution in the 1770s. In response to defiance in several colonies (including Pennsylvania) of English marriage policy, King George III instructed the colonial governors in 1773 to stop passing illegal divorce legislation. Massachusetts Puritans stubbornly refused.<sup>22</sup> According to Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Americans utilized the marriage analogy in their protest of tyranny as the English had in the Civil War. The political press of the 1770s “showed an extraordinary concern with the nature of marriage,” as can be seen in Thomas Paine’s *Pennsylvania Magazine* and Isaiah Thomas’s *Royal American Magazine*.<sup>23</sup>

Philadelphia Baptists, along with Catholics and Anglicans, had long maintained that marriage is indissoluble except by death and that to marry a second spouse before the death of the first constitutes adultery. In a query from 1748, the church of Bethlehem asked, "Whether a man who hath two wives living may be received into communion on his profession of faith. Answer. By no means."<sup>24</sup> One instance of such a case is found in the records of Welsh Tract, which "dismembered" Mary Rees in 1723 for marrying a man against the advice of the church. An English translation of the Welsh record book further explains, "the church looks upon her as having broken the church covenant and also having *broken her marriage vows with her other husband* because neither she nor we know but he is yet alive. *This terminates only on the death of one or the other.*"<sup>25</sup> Similar cases are found in the Welsh Tract records for 1736 and 1781.<sup>26</sup>

Some Philadelphia Baptists were influenced by New England Puritan/republican ideas concerning divorce by the 1760s. In his 1768 *Customs of the Primitive Churches*, Edwards suggested that adultery, as well as death, could dissolve a marriage.<sup>27</sup> Of course, all members of the PBA did not change their views simultaneously; some churches such as Welsh Tract continued to excommunicate the remarried after the Revolution. But a significant shift in opinion seems to have taken place between 1748, when the association declared that divorce and remarriage under any circumstances was adultery, and 1787, when it officially modified its position. The PBA stated in its reply to a query of that year, "If a man and wife should separate, be it for what cause it may, if either of the parties be innocent in the matter, and should apply for baptism, such may be admitted; but may not marry to another without a legal divorce."<sup>28</sup> England had declared such "legal divorce" to be illegal. While Puritan influence had already smoothed over the issue for some Philadelphia Baptists prior to the Revolution, others remained opposed to divorce, which revolutionary propagandists such as Paine boldly advocated. Jack Marietta's research shows that the Quakers tightened their disciplinary reins on marriage in the second half of the eighteenth century as they withdrew from the mainstream.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the Quakers, the PBA loosened its marriage policy as it assimilated into post-revolutionary American culture.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the apparent doctrinal declension in the PBA, the general spirit of the time was one of millennial optimism, both religious and secular. Ernest Tuveson, in *Redeemer Nation*, has explored the background of American identity in the strain of millennial thought defined by the Protestant Reformation.<sup>31</sup> In the first few centuries of their existence, most Christian churches interpreted

end-time prophecies in a literal sense. They were “pre-millennialist,” believing that the rapture and tribulation would precede a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Beginning around the third century, Roman Catholics popularized “a-millennialism,” a strictly allegorical interpretation of millennial passages. “Post-millennialism,” rooted in the Protestant Reformation and thriving in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, taught the progressive fulfillment of Christ’s “spiritual kingdom.” According to this interpretation of eschatology, the world would get better and better in Christ’s absence until the dawn of a spiritual millennium.<sup>32</sup>

Nathan Hatch’s study of New England Congregationalist ministers has shown the fusion of millennialist and republican thought to form a “civil millennialism” evident in both the Seven Years War and the American Revolution. According to Hatch, both Old and New Light Congregationalists saw French Catholicism and absolute monarchy as the antichrist. Beginning in the 1760s, the perceived threat to liberty assumed a new form: England.<sup>33</sup> Instead of waiting for Christ to return and conquer antichrist, many Americans saw it as their prophetic role to pave the way for the millennium by defeating it by secular means. Such a perspective was not limited to New England Congregationalists, and it did not disappear at the close of the Revolution. According to Fred Hood, there was an “absolute dominance of postmillennialism in the middle and southern states in the early national period,” especially among the Dutch Reformed and Presbyterians.<sup>34</sup>

The Philadelphia Baptists, however, appear to have been premillennialist. Although the PBA did not publish any eschatological treatises of its own, a prominent leader did. As a student at Bristol College in the 1740s, Morgan Edwards wrote an essay on eschatology entitled “Millennium.”<sup>35</sup> In this essay, he went against the scholarly grain of his day and interpreted millennial prophecy in a literal sense. According to Edwards, the millennial reign of Christ was not an allegory but an actual event spanning the thousand-year period following the tribulation, during which Christ would personally reign on the earth.<sup>36</sup> By every indication, it appears that Edwards’s conclusions accorded with the position of the PBA. When the Philadelphia Baptist Church asked John Gill to assist in finding them a suitable new pastor, Gill replied that their qualifications were so demanding he knew of no one but Edwards who would come close to meeting them. Edwards took an active role in the association after accepting Philadelphia’s invitation, and in 1788 printed his “Millennium.” Had there been any significant opposition to the work, other Philadelphia Baptists likely would have voiced their opinions to the contrary.

Philadelphia Baptists, nevertheless, did join post-millennialists in support of the American Revolution. How much of the millennial rhetoric rubbed off on them as a result of the partnership? William Rogers, the aforementioned pastor of the Philadelphia church, was asked to address the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati (a fraternity of former Continental Army officers) at its meeting in the Presbyterian church on Arch Street on July 4, 1789.<sup>37</sup> Rogers' spirited oration is an excellent example of how the millennial rhetoric of the Revolution could transform Philadelphia Baptists. He spoke of defending "the temple of Freedom, from the first approaches of tyranny," and urged his audience to "Impress it . . . on the hearts of your children; next to their religion" to carry on the responsibility.<sup>38</sup> He expressed hope that "the UNION of AMERICA [would] become the standard of FAITH, FREEDOM, and good GOVERNMENT to the latest period of time!" and went on to quote the poem beginning, "'Tis but the morning of the world with us . . ."<sup>39</sup> Finally, he concluded with an appeal to prove worthy of freedom and look forward with hope

. . . to a state of more perfect society,—to that grand community, where "universal love smiles on all around." There, every discordant note shall cease; and congenial souls, fired with pure affection's celestial flame, shall evermore unite, in the swelling note of general praise, to GOD OUR KING.<sup>40</sup>

No New England Congregationalist minister could have expressed "civil millennialism" better. Rogers likely said a hearty "amen" to Presbyterian pastor Ashbel Green's prayer on the same occasion that God would

hasten the time . . . in the revolution of human things—in the improvement of the human mind, in the progress of knowledge, in the perfection of society, and above all, in the extension and obedience of the gospel of Christ,—when liberty, civil and religious, shall be universally enjoyed, and rightly improved;—when the reign of peace shall commence upon earth;—when the Redeemer's kingdom shall fully come;—when Jew and Gentile shall be brought into the same faith;—when there shall be one sheepfold and one shepherd.

Eschatological differences cast no shadow over this celebration of civil millennialism, led by none other than a Philadelphia Baptist.



This was no isolated incident. Years later in 1807, Samuel Jones delivered a "Century Sermon" before the PBA, in celebration of the organization's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, that also reflected some degree of postmillennialist influence. Themes of optimism, brotherhood, and uncertainty of prophetic interpretation permeate his discourse. After speaking of the prophetic spread of the gospel to the Gentiles until the commencement of the millennium, Jones praised American Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Methodists for their partnership in missionary work since the Great Awakening. He said they were "serving we hope, our common Lord and Master, according to the light they have received."<sup>41</sup> He went on to say, "It would seem that knowledge, civil and religious liberty, and with them religion itself are tending westward. With the sun they rose in the East, after a course of ages crossed the Atlantic, and it is likely will progress westward until they reach the Pacific Ocean, civilizing and making happy this western hemisphere in their course."<sup>42</sup> This spiritual version of what would later be termed "Manifest Destiny" continued,

Thus when we look back, as from an eminence, on what has taken place within a small compass, in the course of the last century, in promoting the kingdom of the Messiah in the world . . . Before another century will revolve . . . we hope and expect, that the latter day of glory, the spiritual reign of Christ, will commence, in comparison of which, what we have seen, however glorious, can be but a prelude, a faint shadow.<sup>43</sup>

Notice that he said "spiritual reign of Christ," not literal. Jones stopped short of renouncing a literal interpretation of prophecy, but his comments on the antichrist's defeat and the restoration of Israel showed clear signs of uncertainty. He said, "Should it enter the mind of any that this is a figurative expression, we grant it may be so: but then if it be, it is such an one as denotes something very great and glorious indeed; nor is there room to doubt, but the power of God is able to bring that saying to pass literally."<sup>44</sup> Although he ended the sermon with a reference to Christ's second coming, he seemed much more confused about the nature of the event than his predecessors.

But perhaps the greatest obstacle of all to the cooperation of Philadelphia Baptists in the revolution effort was the fact that fellow Baptists, especially in Massachusetts and Virginia, were suffering discrimination from their respective colonial governments. The Congregational establishment in

Massachusetts taxed them unfairly for the support of religion, especially in Ashfield. When they refused to pay such taxes or to file annual exemption certificates (that were often administered unfairly and seen by Baptists as a symbol of state interference), they had their property confiscated and were sometimes jailed.<sup>45</sup> In the south, the Anglican establishment also taxed the dissenters and imprisoned their ministers for unlawful preaching.<sup>46</sup> As William Frost has shown, Pennsylvania led the way for religious liberty by its example; it should come as no surprise that Philadelphia Baptists wanted other Baptists to receive the same toleration they experienced at home.<sup>47</sup> Just prior the outbreak of war, the Baptist church at Scotch Plains raised money to send "Mr. Smith" to England "on the account of the Prsbeterans opresing the Baptists."<sup>48</sup>

Baptists in the south protested without the aid of associations in New England or the middle colonies, partly because they found champions such as Jefferson and Madison among the local elite, diminishing their need for outside help. New England Baptists, on the other hand, did solicit the help of both the PBA and the Continental Congress. The Warren Association met in Medfield, Massachusetts in September of 1773 and recommended that the churches join in protest by refusing to file certificates; it also agreed to publish Isaac Backus's defense of their actions, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*. In the autumn of 1774, the Warren Association sent Backus to petition the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. William McLoughlin explains that although they realized Congress could not invalidate Massachusetts law, they hoped that delegates from other states might pressure the Massachusetts delegates to be more accommodating. Taking the advice of Philadelphia Quaker allies, Backus arranged to meet with the Massachusetts delegates (John and Samuel Adams, Robert Treat Paine, and Thomas Cushing) and several delegates from other colonies in Carpenters' Hall on October 14. Several representatives of the PBA, among them Morgan Edwards, William Rogers, Samuel Jones, William Van Horne, and John Gano, accompanied Backus to present a memorial of grievances. John and Samuel Adams responded by making light of their complaints and defending the establishment, yet promising they would try to help. The new grievance committee, established by the PBA to help the New England Baptists, met the next day and expressed dissatisfaction with the response of the Massachusetts delegates. When the Massachusetts Provincial Congress reluctantly agreed to hear Backus's petition, it tactfully suggested that Backus take the matter before the next General Assembly.<sup>49</sup>

As a result of Backus's petitioning, several Massachusetts delegates and Congregational ministers such as Ezra Stiles accused Baptists of being Tories and attempting to prevent colonial unity against Britain. Their suspicions were not always groundless, especially in the more neutral middle colonies. In the 1760s, for instance, Philadelphia Baptists failed to join the Presbyterian and Congregationalist opposition to the establishment of an Anglican bishop in the colonies.<sup>50</sup> Morgan Edwards went so far as to write in *Goddard's Philadelphia Chronicle* in 1770,

But truly it is in the Interest of the Baptists that the Church of England should multiply in Massachusetts & Connecticut, so far as to form a Balance of Ecclesiastical power there, as in other colonies. And as for Bishops they are welcome here: their coming thither is an Object worthy of Petitions: we cannot be worse off; we may be better; they are Gentlemen at least and have some Generosity for Vanquished enemies. But the New-England People (of a certain denomination) are supercilious in Power, and Mean in Conquest. I will Venture to say that all the Bishops in Old England have not done the Baptists there so much harm for eighty years past, as the Presbyterians have done this year to the Baptists of New England.<sup>51</sup>

The King and royal governors had on several occasions responded favorably to Baptist petitions of grievances. Why should they join their worst enemies in a war against these allies?

Some Philadelphia Baptists never found a good answer to that question and therefore remained loyal to England. Edwards is the most prominent example. McLoughlin suggests that his loyalism cost him the pulpit in Philadelphia, but McKibbens and Smith argue that factors besides his political opinions (such as his frequent trips and an embarrassing early funeral sermon) could also explain his resignation in 1771.<sup>52</sup> At any rate, Edwards supplied empty pulpits in the middle colonies until 1775, when the Philadelphia Committee of Safety marked him as a dangerous person. The committee's chairman Colonel Samuel Miles (who was also a member of the Baptist church in Philadelphia ordained as a deacon by Edwards) intervened in his behalf. After signing a recantation of his loyalty, Edwards was allowed to remain at his home in Newark, Delaware, under house arrest for the duration of the war.<sup>53</sup> As for the sincerity of his recantation, Edwards insisted that William Rogers remember him as a loyalist in his funeral sermon. The angry tone of his 1792

New Jersey history is also revealing. He repeatedly lamented the destruction of church records in the late revolution and denounced the spiraling value of paper money: "that sacrilegious thing, *Congress money*" had reduced considerable church finances "to a pittance."<sup>54</sup> In one instance he wrote of the revolution's paper money, "O thou robber of churches, and of the fatherless and widows, what hast thou to answer for!"<sup>55</sup>

In spite of the claims of denominational historians that Edwards was nothing but an embarrassing exception to the rule that Baptists were patriots "to a man," other loyalists certainly can be found among Philadelphia Baptists. According to Maring, "in some sections of New Jersey there were many Loyalists. Many of these migrated to Nova Scotia and elsewhere . . . Some Baptist families from Monmouth and Middlesex Counties moved to Nova Scotia, and some who were disposed to favor the British government remained in New Jersey"<sup>56</sup> Maring finds evidence of loyalism among some of the Baptists of Middletown, Upper Freehold, Knowlton, Kingwood, Morristown, Cohansey, and Piscataway.<sup>57</sup> After hostilities ceased, wartime factionalism appears to have dissolved more quickly than it formed, as can be seen in the Middletown church records. But for a time, loyalists in some churches found it difficult to live and worship alongside their patriot brethren.<sup>58</sup>

Neutrality, however, was more common than loyalism in the PBA, especially before the outbreak of war at Lexington and Concord in 1775. The language used in the association minutes appears very neutral until well into the war. After 1774 the association proclaimed fasts for "public calamity." It did not even meet in 1777 due to Philadelphia's occupation, but not until 1779 did its records include any partisan statements. McLoughlin points out the initial reluctance of New England Baptists to support the revolution; they denounced the Sons of Liberty as hypocritical and did not choose sides until the last minute.<sup>59</sup> According to McKibbens and Smith, the same was true of Baptists in the middle colonies. "Edwards was by no means the only Baptist minister prior to the Battle of Lexington in 1775 who was accused of Tory sympathies," and "his politics did not affect his standing within the Philadelphia Baptist Association, at least until the beginning of overt hostilities in 1775."<sup>60</sup>

However slowly, the tide did begin turning in favor of the revolution. According to William McLoughlin, the apolitical New England Baptists initially thought of parliamentary taxation as the Congregationalists' problem, not their own: "They thought of the Congregationalists as 'the enemy'

more often than the King or Parliament." By 1775, "they had achieved the position of an aggressive and troublesome 'faction' whose influence might, for ulterior purposes, be given to or sought by either side in the Revolutionary struggle." Baptists such as Isaac Backus came to link their struggle for religious liberty with the colonies' struggle for political independence, however irrationally, only when it became apparent that England was losing its control over the colonies. According to McLoughlin, "The Revolution caught them by surprise. They produced rationalizations for patriotism after the fact." This was easiest in the south, where patriotic Baptists linked the abuses of the colonial Anglican establishment with English tyranny. Baptists in the middle colonies were the last to jump on the bandwagon. The PBA expressed regret for supporting Backus in petitioning the Continental Congress in 1774. As late as March of 1775, the PBA Grievance Committee criticized Backus for appealing to an illegal body for help and jeopardizing the King's favor of them.<sup>61</sup> The PBA's ties to New England and Virginia Baptists created pressure to support the Revolution jointly, but the association was still uncomfortable with revolution. The next month, however, the first shots were fired in Lexington and Concord, and Philadelphia Baptists were forced to choose sides quickly.

Religious reasons fail to fully explain the PBA's hesitance to support the Revolution. As John Neuchwander has demonstrated, the middle colonies were suspicious of New England's ambitions and were the last to endorse independence in 1776.<sup>62</sup> The conservative position of politicians in the middle colonies likely had much to do with the PBA's early neutrality. Likewise, religious reasons alone fail to explain the conversion of Philadelphia Baptists to patriotism. Although some divisive ideological points had been smoothed over in the religious transition of the preceding decades, other obstacles remained to be swept aside by overpowering secular currents of political thought and popular protest. Gary Nash credits Philadelphia as being one of three major colonial cities at the "cutting edge" of political change in his study of urban class-consciousness. Philadelphia's conservative urban gentry lost control to radical artisans and militiamen in the 1770s.<sup>63</sup> Baptists, like other religious groups, were not so isolated as to be insulated from their political environment. McLoughlin recognizes that the Baptists of New England valued not only freedom of conscience, but property and constitutional rights as well, although an emphasis on the former overshadowed the latter for a time. Eventually, though, they linked the two in their opposition to Britain. By 1775, he writes,

The tyranny and corruption which the Baptists had myopically seen only in New England suddenly loomed before them in a broader and more horrendous prospect from beyond the ocean. It was as if two children were fighting each other and the smaller had sought the aid of a third and larger boy only to discover that this arbitrator was not only strong enough to hold back the bigger boy but claimed the right to dominate them both for his own ulterior purposes.<sup>64</sup>

In Pennsylvania, as elsewhere, there was no great divide between religion and politics.

In her analysis of denominational politics, Bonomi suggests that it was in Pennsylvania that religion and politics were most intertwined. Owen Ireland has discovered a clear pattern in the votes over Pennsylvania's new constitution in the late 1770s, with "Calvinists" such as Presbyterians overwhelmingly in favor and "anti-Calvinists" such as Quakers opposed.<sup>65</sup> According to Maring, most New Jersey Baptists had been anti-proprietary yeomen earlier in the colonial period; their involvement in colonial politics had reflected more than religious convictions.<sup>66</sup> Naturally, the small proportion of Baptists in the middle colonies prevented them from forming a significant political bloc, but Baptists did make political decisions like everyone else. When they voted, ran for office, or took up arms, they did so for a complex variety of reasons both religious and secular. Whether because of their connections with other religious groups, place of residence, social class, or political principles, Philadelphia Baptists eventually rallied around the American flag.

Among the most notable examples were several chaplains. It was no small commitment for pastors to leave their congregations for the battlefield. William Rogers resigned as pastor in Philadelphia to serve as chaplain of Pennsylvania's foot battalions in 1776; from 1778 to 1781 he was a Brigade Chaplain in the Continental Army.<sup>67</sup> John Gano, David Spencer, Nicholas Cox, William Worth, and Hezekiah Smith were also chaplains.<sup>68</sup> Several Baptists were also involved in politics. Richard Ryerson's study of Pennsylvania's radical committees of the mid-1770s identifies a half dozen or so Baptists, among them Samuel Miles of Philadelphia. Miles, a well-known militia officer, represented Philadelphia County in the Assembly and served on the Committee of Safety.<sup>69</sup> John Hart, a Hopewell deacon and New Jersey legislator, represented his state in the Continental Congress and was the only Baptist to sign the Declaration of Independence.<sup>70</sup> Countless Philadelphia

Baptists participated in less prominent ways; Burgis Allison of Pennepek prepared kegs of explosives to float down the Delaware River and destroy the British fleet guarding Philadelphia.<sup>71</sup> The cemetery at Welsh Tract contains the graves of many laymen who were patriot officers, privates, and civilians.<sup>72</sup> Numerous other examples exist, but suffice it to say that Philadelphia Baptists did much to redeem their reputation from charges of loyalism.<sup>73</sup>

Once the fighting began, the damage inflicted by British troops no doubt pushed many straggling neutrals into opposition. Maring points out that meeting-houses were "hard hit" by the war. Morristown's and Upper Freehold's were occupied and damaged by British troops. Middletown had to meet in Abel Morgan's barn after the British took over their meeting-house and cut down oak trees for fuel at the church baptismal site.<sup>74</sup> In September 1777, a military engagement took place at Welsh Tract: "The Americans after being driven from Cooch's bridge retreated along Christiana and made their last stand under the shelter of the church walls. At this time a cannon ball is said to have passed through the building."<sup>75</sup> Cannonballs also ripped through membership lists; membership declined significantly in some churches as the war interrupted regular church attendance.<sup>76</sup>

The association minutes reveal the solidification of political opinion after the outbreak of hostilities. Samuel Jones's circular letter of 1779 spoke of "the steps whereby divine Providence interposed in our favor during the present contest with Great Britain." Abel Morgan's message on fasting and prayer read: ". . . our continent is filled with tears and blood, ravages and desolation abound, perpetrated by English troops, and, if possible by the more wicked combinations of base traitors among ourselves . . ." And the following year the minutes said of the Charleston Association, "God grant, that the several churches of this our sister Association may be speedily delivered from British oppression!" The PBA was meeting when news of Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown reached Philadelphia in October 1781. The minutes praised God "for the recent signal success granted to the American arms, in the surrender of the whole British army, under the command of Lord Cornwallis, with the effusion of so little blood."<sup>77</sup>

As Jon Butler has observed, religious issues were marginal and did not make people patriots. Most of the patriotic ministers of the early revolution belonged to established or semi-established churches and were seen as hypocritical by dissenters. Most other ministers were silent about politics before the war began, and loyalist clergymen were found in every denomination. In the short term, the war devastated many churches; it set the PBA's



membership statistics back two decades. But after joining the revolution for primarily secular reasons, religious groups reaped enormous benefits from their association with the revolutionary cause. Butler writes, "the churches lent their weight to the American cause in a way that paid immense dividends in coming decades."<sup>78</sup> Patricia Bonomi says of Virginia, "The American Revolution provided the Baptists with the ultimate political leverage, and they used it boldly to gain religious equality."<sup>79</sup>

Just as American slaves would later turn a white man's war for the Union into a war for abolition with their crucial help, American Baptists used the war for political independence to advance their own war for religious liberty. The gamble paid off not only in the gradual dis-establishment of state churches in New England and the South but also in skyrocketing membership after religious denominations found a comfortable place in an emerging civil religion. It became more acceptable to be a Baptist not only because of the patriotic image, but also because doctrines disagreeable to human nature had adapted to the more liberal environment, enhancing the appeal of churches that also boasted a democratic model of government.<sup>80</sup> In hindsight, the participation of the PBA and other Baptist groups in the revolution seems natural, and the groundless myth that the Revolution was a war fought for religious liberty seems almost believable. But to the Philadelphia Baptists who lived through it, the revolution was a controversial issue; they debated whether to support it until the last minute. The positive consequences of that decision are well known and celebrated, but the prerequisite compromises have been all but forgotten.

## NOTES

1. *The Bible*, Numbers 23:9.
2. A. D. Gillette, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707–1807* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851; reprint, Paris, Arkansas: The Baptist Standard Bearer, n.d.), 128. Thomas McKibbens and Kenneth Smith, *The Life and Works of Morgan Edwards* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 38.
3. James Strong, *Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible* (Madison, New Jersey: James Strong, 1890), #2803.
4. My Master's Thesis examined in detail the PBA's original distinctiveness and its subsequent assimilation in both religion and politics. See Jessica Flinchum, "Reckoned Among the Nations": The Americanization of the Philadelphia Baptist Association" (Lexington, Kentucky: M.A. Thesis, University of Kentucky, 2004).
5. Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind, from the Great*



- Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Harry Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (October 1977): 519; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Mark Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1977).
6. A.D. Gillette, *PBA Minutes*, table for 1764. Of these eight, three were in New York, three in Virginia, one in Connecticut, and one in Maryland. See map in figure 1 for location and origin of member churches. The five churches surrounded by boxes (Penepek or Pennypack, Middletown, Piscataqua, Cohansey, and Welsh Tract) made up the original member churches of the PBA in 1707. Cold Spring dissolved soon after its constitution. Over the next century, from these five churches sprang dozens of other churches near and far. It is interesting to note the terminology Morgan Edwards and others used in accounts of church organization. Edwards, for example, calls Middletown "a mother church; for from it sprang Upperfreehold and Hightstown." He writes of Piscataqua, "this is a mother church; Scotchplains, Morristown, and the Sabbatarians are the offspring of Piscataqua." He calls the Kingwood congregation "the daughter of Hopewell." In describing the origin of Scotchplains, he writes that Piscataqua "the mother church detached from the old hive, a swarm, and formed them into a distinct society." Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists in New Jersey* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1792), 15, 23, 57, 69.
  7. For an English translation of a fascinating contemporary history of Welsh Baptists, see Jonathan Davis, *History of the Welsh Baptists, from the year sixty-three to the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy* (Pittsburgh: D.M. Hogan, 1835).
  8. Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 170–172.
  9. William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. 1989).
  10. The PBA defined this term as the belief that either hell does not exist, no person will go there, or that it is only temporary, and that every soul will eventually go the heaven. In short, it is the doctrine of the universal salvation of all mankind. See Circular Letter in *PBA Minutes*, 257.
  11. Norman Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey, A Study in Transition* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1964), 79. David Spencer, *The Early Baptists of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: William Syckelmoore, 1877), 130–32.
  12. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 79.
  13. *PBA Minutes*, 237.
  14. *PBA Minutes*, 257.
  15. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 80–81. He refers to Kingwood, Pittsgrove, Cape May, Lyon Farms, Upper Freehold, Hightstown, Salem, and Middletown.
  16. *PBA Minutes*, 73. The PBA Minutes display the official positions adopted by delegates representing member churches. Although association statements by no means necessarily reflect unanimous opinion, in the absence of a reliable sample of church records it is the best indicator of what Philadelphia Baptists believed.
  17. 1 Peter 2:13–18 "... Honour the king ..."; Romans 13:1–7 "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God ... ye must

needs be subject . . . Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour." *King James Version Bible*. Note that nothing is said about representation.

18. Morgan Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the Following Titles: Millennium and Last-novelties* (Philadelphia: Dobson and Lang, 1788), 6. "And glad I am that I may speak freely to the matter. It is what I could not have done in a late reign, for fear of being called a *fifth monarchy man* (as Verner and his company); and being cut to pieces by soldiers: But George the second is not Charles the second: George (whom God long preserve) is not afraid of the *fifth monarchy*, nor would be loth to give up his kingdom to him *by whom kings reign and princes decree justice*."
19. Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 158.
20. Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 96–116
21. Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, 145–146.
22. Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, 153.
23. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 14–15.
24. *PBA Minutes*, 58. The query response cites Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, which read as follows: "But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." "And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery." *KJV Bible*. The PBA apparently did not accept the argument for an "exception clause" in Matthew, interpreting "fornication" as "adultery" and allowing divorce for that cause. Instead, the PBA held to the traditional interpretation of "fornication" as an offense peculiar to the Jewish betrothal period.
25. D.V. Spangler, "History of the Welsh Tract Baptist Church, Pencander Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware" (n.p., 1952; available from [www.ls.net/~newriver/de/ut.htm](http://www.ls.net/~newriver/de/ut.htm); Internet; accessed spring 2004), emphasis mine.
26. *Welsh Tract Baptist Church Record Book*, also found in Edward Wright and Horace Burr, *Early Church Records of New Castle County*, vol. 1 (Westminster, Maryland: Willow Bend Books, 1994), 97. "April 3, 1736 Elinor Griffith excluded – married to another husband and that while her first husband was alive." "Judith Hendrickson disowned for marrying another woman's husband and living with him as a wife, Jun 3, 1781." Similar cases are found in churches of other regions, particularly the South. For an example, see South Carolina's *Welsh Neck Baptist Church Record Book*, 1795.
27. Morgan Edwards, *The Customs of Primitive Churches* (Philadelphia: Andrew Steuart, 1768), XL.
28. *PBA Minutes*, 229.
29. Jack Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748–178*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).
30. Susan Juster has argued that women lost influence in churches as Baptists gained insider status in the late eighteenth century. If she is correct, her observation casts an interesting light on the simultaneous trend towards a looser divorce policy. It is unlikely that this was the result of women demanding freedom in a revolution against their husbands, but rather of American men and women both applying the political ideology of revolution to their personal lives by challenging the bonds

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- of matrimony. See Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (London: Cornell University Press, 1994).
31. Ernest Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Ideology of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968).
  32. Tom Ross, *Elementary Eschatology: A Study of Premillennial Prophecy* (South Point, Ohio: Tom Ross, 1996), Chapter 1.
  33. Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*. Also see Chapter 6 of James Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth Century New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
  34. Fred Hood, *Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783–1837* (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 70–71.
  35. Thomas McKibbens and Kenneth Smith, *The Life and Works of Morgan Edwards*.
  36. Edwards, *Millennium*.
  37. In his study of the Society of the Cincinnati, Minor Myers points out that the controversial fraternity's membership included a striking percentage of Masons: "In many instances the Cincinnati were the masons. In Connecticut 40 percent of the Cincinnati were Freemasons, in Pennsylvania 36 percent. In many instances individuals joined the Masons after joining the society." Minor Myers, *Liberty Without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 136. Judging from the considerable portion of his oration spent defending the origin and nature of the society, William Rogers felt the need to justify his presence. He repeatedly declared that the Cincinnati was different from secret orders such as those found in Europe. This organization, he emphasized, stood for patriotism, order, virtue, and brotherhood. William Rogers, "An Oration" (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati, 1789), 12. Never mind that a large number of his audience were Freemasons, although some of the more conservative Baptists would not approve of his presence. Just as it was no small thing for Philadelphia Baptists to cooperate with Congregationalists and Presbyterians, it was also unnatural for them to associate so closely with Masons and deists. According to Jon Butler, much of the millennial optimism stemmed not from Christianity but from faith in secular Enlightenment. See Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 214–19, Chapter 3 and Steven Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
  38. Rogers, "An Oration," 9.
  39. Rogers, "An Oration," 21.
  40. Rogers, "An Oration," 22.
  41. *PBA Minutes*, 462–63.
  42. *PBA Minutes*, 464.
  43. *PBA Minutes*, 465–466.
  44. *PBA Minutes*, 466.
  45. William McLoughlin, *New England Dissent 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), Chapter 29. "Massive Civil Disobedience as a Baptist Tactic in 1773," *American Quarterly* 21 (winter 1969): 710–27.
  46. See Rhys Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*.

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47. William Frost, *A Perfect Freedom: Religious Liberty in Pennsylvania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
48. *Scotch Plains Baptist Church Record Book*, 1774–1775.
49. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 563, 552–553, 557, 559, 561, 565.
50. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 577.
51. McKibbens and Smith, *Life and Works of Morgan Edwards*, 27.
52. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent* 577; McKibbens and Smith, *Life and Works of Morgan Edwards*, 22–27.
53. McKibbens and Smith, *Life and Works of Morgan Edwards*, 31, 39–40.
54. Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists in New Jersey*, 13.
55. Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of the Baptists in New Jersey*, 70.
56. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 71, 74.
57. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 71–75.
58. A few years after the war's end, Middletown questioned a man concerning his long absence from church meetings. In response, "for his neglect before the past war he said very little for, only he were some thing infirm . . . his reasons for said neglect in the time of the war was, that he was afraid of being taken up and abused for some matters that had passed during the late war." The nature of his conduct during the war is unclear, but finding his reasons satisfactory, the church restored him to fellowship. At the same time, another man "spake very reasonably on the subject of some matters he were charged with in the time of the late war and at some particular times since . . . the church agreed the said matters and debates should rest as they were, untill a future time and till there was a visable testimony, in [his] life and conversation." The man "said he was willing should rest untill the church should be satisfied." *Middletown Baptist Church Record Book*, January 1786. An exceptional case of church unity in the face of political division is found in Eaton's Baptist Church in western North Carolina. In November 1775, the church "agreed upon concerning the American Cause if any of the Brethern sees cause to joyn in it they had the leberly to do it without being called to an account by the Church for it but wheather joyn or not ioyne there should be used with brotherly love and freedom for the futer." *Eaton's Baptist Church Record Book*, 1775.
59. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 556, 572.
60. McKibbens and Smith, *Life and Works of Morgan Edwards*, 26–27. In fact, he returned to claim a prominent position in the PBA after his exile.
61. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 555, 572, 576, 565–566, 577.
62. John Neuenschwander, *The Middle Colonies and the Coming of the American Revolution* (London: Kennikat Press, 1973).
63. Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.)
64. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 574–75.
65. Owen S. Ireland, "The Ethnic-Religious Dimension of Pennsylvania Politics, 1778–1779," *William and Mary Quarterly* 30 (July 1973): 423–448.
66. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 28.
67. Spencer, *Early Baptists of Philadelphia*, 120.
68. Spencer, *Early Baptists of Philadelphia*, 127–128; Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 71–73.

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69. Richard Ryerson, *The Revolution is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765–1776* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 87, 126, 136–37, 140, Appendices B and M.
70. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 73.
71. Spencer, *Early Baptists in Philadelphia*, 120.
72. Spangler, "History of the Welsh Tract Baptist Church," Chapter 7.
73. For further study of Baptist ministers in the American Revolution, see Hywel Davies, "The American Revolution and the Baptist Atlantic," *Baptist Quarterly* 36 (1995): 132–49 and Bryan Thomas Ross, "'Rouse! Stand! And Take the Alarm!': Baptist Justifications for the American Revolution," *Baptist History and Heritage* 26 (1991): 30–43.
74. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 75; Spencer, *Early Baptists in Philadelphia*, 133.
75. Spangler, "History of the Welsh Tract Baptist Church," Chapter 4.
76. Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, 75–76.
77. *PBA Minutes*, 166, 168, 169, 175.
78. Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, Chapter 7.
79. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 185.
80. See Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) for the similar experience of assimilated Methodism.