

## “Free Indeed!” – Virginia Baptists and Slavery

### How a state Baptist historical organization commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of emancipation

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Emancipation of the slaves in the United States became a signal event in history – first, for the enslaved who were then free; for the Republic which finally was living up to the ideals for which it stood; and even for the Baptists in a slave-owing state such as Virginia. Emancipation was a signal event in the history of Virginia Baptists for several reasons including the fact that in the immediate months following the end of slavery, 57 percent of the membership of the churches left the rolls. And over the next five years some 250 new churches were planted by the newly-freed people among the Baptists in Virginia alone; and these new churches were constituted by a people who largely were penniless and illiterate. It is a remarkable story of massive church planting which is reminiscent of the early Christian church.

Despite the signal event, emancipation and the rise of the black church has been a largely overlooked story by the very keepers of Virginia Baptist history. With the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War and emancipation upon us, the two organizations which I lead devoted time, energy, creativity and resources to commemorate the anniversary and to examine these overlooked topics.

Let me share that the two organizations are the Virginia Baptist Historical Society (the oldest and largest of the various state Baptist historical organizations in the United States and across the years it has amassed a large collection of materials including black Baptist association records) and the Center for Baptist Heritage & Studies (founded at the beginning of this century to be focused upon education through programming, exhibits, conferencing, and the creation of resources and publications). The two organizations work hand-in-glove and the two joined for this special project. The two also are agencies or “ministry partners” of the Baptist General Association of Virginia which also is the parent body of the University of Richmond where both organizations are housed in a building which was provided by Woman’s Missionary Union of Virginia expressly to house the Virginia Baptist Historical Society and to serve as a living memorial to the Virginia Baptist ministers who were imprisoned for their faith in the 1700s.

We called the project “free indeed!” from the snippet of Scripture - “...if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed!” - John 8:36 - and it was to commemorate the anniversary in three ways:

- 1) **A Name Registry.** For many years I have wanted to have an index of the names found in the old church records in the Society’s collection. We have about 4,000 original church record books – the minutes and rolls kept by the clerks of the churches – and about 250 of these were from the antebellum period. I wanted to have a list of the names found within those manuscript books and so I assigned one of my colleagues – Michael Whitt, special projects assistant - the task of pulling out the names and placing them into a user-friendly data base. It required about three years of work but today we have a registry of more than 51,000 names – blacks, slave and free; white surnames – arranged by county and then by

church. It is in hardcopy and in a digital format. It is valuable for social historians, local church historians, and family researchers. Recently the Richmond Area African American Genealogical Society came calling and one researcher shouted when he found his great-great grandmother. Another recent visitor discovered her ancestors but she learned that they were not slaves – they were free people of color but the descendant had never known this fact. And so we have the name registry.

- 2) **A Book.** As my colleague, Michael Whitt, was gathering the names, he would interrupt my work to tell me about some interesting story hidden in the old church records until finally I told him to write them down and maybe we would publish a book. Indeed we did! Michael wrote the bulk of the text and together we edited and proofed and published “free indeed!” – the book – which gives a lengthy account of the relationships between whites and blacks within the Baptist churches of Virginia prior to emancipation. Our Society has been publishing an annual journal for 50 years but this edition, the 50<sup>th</sup>, was the first to give serious attention to the story of the enslaved and how slavery was regarded and treated by white Baptists in Virginia. We also included several previously unpublished manuscripts within an appendix including two eye-witness accounts to slavery and the churches as written by two white ministers in the 1870s, placed in our collection and largely forgotten. They tell about preaching on the plantations, about black preachers and about relationships between the races. Other items in the appendices include John Leland’s account of slavery in Virginia; the testimony of a black preacher from the 1850s on why he became a Baptist; the remembrances of a noted white pastor, Robert Ryland, who led a black congregation; and a history of black Baptists in Virginia written in the 1920s and buried in the state Baptist paper. The book totals 229 pages and includes illustrations. And so now we have the registry and the book.
- 3) **An Exhibit.** Along the way, we began to identify unique and interesting items within the Historical Society’s vast collection that would be effective in a public exhibit. We selected about 50 such items – artifacts, manuscripts, church records, photographs, and other illustrative material – which would capture the interests of visitors. We commissioned a young Baptist artist to create original art work for the exhibit. We opened the exhibit in January 2012 and plan to continue the exhibition through this calendar year. We have had hundreds of visitors including numerous church and civic groups. The groups have included those who otherwise may never have visited our Historical Society – several African-American churches have brought groups for personalized tours of the exhibit, school groups have come, some directors of missions in various district associations deliberately have invited black and white pastors to come together, African-American historical and genealogical groups have toured the exhibit, and on and on. One WMU group from a Richmond area church came; and when the leader arrived she said that she wished she had invited the women’s organization from the black church which had come out of her church. I told her that it was too late for that day but it was not too late to plan another visit and she did and a group of the black women came with her. While on a day trip to Washington, D.C. with my wife, there was a group of about 20 high school age kids – predominately black and a few whites – along with some adult chaperones. We were on the same train together – by happenstance were at the same restaurant together – seated across from one another – and then on the same train coming home at the end of the day. I made their acquaintance and discovered that they were part of a program trying to get school dropouts to work on their GED and to have a part-time job. I invited the group to come see “free indeed!” and they did – one young man pronounced it “awesome” and put a dollar in the donation box. We talked about slave days but we also talked about the world of work today. It was a tour which was serendipitous. There were many experiences in year one of “free indeed!” A retired high school history teacher, a Baptist herself, spent hours reading every line of every

label in the exhibit. The African-American history consultant for the Virginia Historical Society came at 10 o'clock and left at 3 o'clock, reading every label and commenting upon the unique items in the exhibit. From that visit, a friendship was forged and the history consultant became a featured speaker in a conference we sponsored in May; without the exhibit and the name project, I doubt our paths would have crossed. We placed a signboard at the front door – a board shaped in the likeness of an African-American woman of yesteryear and she carries a chalkboard with lively notes about the exhibit. The signboard has brought in a multitude of casual visitors – University students and professors and campus visitors – who otherwise would have never darkened the doors of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society. When international visitors come to the Virginia Baptist Mission Board which is located about two miles from our building, they frequently are brought by a Mission Board staff member to visit the Historical Society; and of course, over the last year and half, they have seen the story of blacks and whites worshipping together in antebellum times. One dark-skinned Panamanian Baptist toured the exhibit and left, remarking that it made him sad to learn about slavery. I replied that he should feel glad that these people triumphed over terrible trials.

And so our “free indeed!” project includes **a name registry, a book and an exhibit**. The book and the exhibit look at the trials and triumphs of Virginia’s enslaved and freedmen and they also offer an examination of the relationships between white and black Baptists in Virginia. There are heart-rending stories. There are good stories and bad stories. There are beautiful accounts and ugly accounts. Together they are form a shared history between whites and blacks.

Let me pause and give you a visual representation of “free indeed!” Instead of creating a power point illustration and bringing a laptop and projector, I have decided to rely upon something I first saw as a child in the Primary department of the Sunday school in my home church – indeed, all I really ever needed to know I gained from the Primary department – that God is love and that Jesus loves me. I remember sitting in those little chairs in a semi-circle while a tall, stately woman named Mrs. Callaway turned the pages of beautiful color illustrations of whatever Bible story was the lesson of that Sunday. And so I will use her method.

### **Early History of Black Baptists in Virginia**

Remember that there were Africans in Virginia before there were Baptists! Every school child in Virginia has learned that the first slaves arrived in 1619. It is not until 1699 that there was documented evidence of Baptist preaching in the colony although there may have been Baptists in Virginia as early as the 1680s. It was in 1714 that the first church was constituted so Africans were in Virginia at least 60 to 100 years before the Baptists.

In the exhibit we go back to the first documented evidence of black members of Baptist churches in Virginia. “Negro Adam” – property of Thomas Dodson - was the first black who can be documented in one of the church records at the Virginia Baptist Historical Society. He was dismissed from Broad Run Baptist Church near Warrenton, Virginia in the central part of the state, in May 1764 because he had gone to another community. The following month two more came into the fellowship – “Negro Dick” and “Negro Sarah,” both of whom belonged to the Dodsons. Likely there were earlier black Baptists in Virginia but these are the first whose names survive in the Baptist archives.

Why were the enslaved and free blacks – people like Adam, Dick and Sarah – drawn to Baptist churches? They found **a degree of freedom**. It was not perfect freedom but it was more than they would have found in other

churches and certainly in the larger culture. Just like the whites, they were considered sinners saved by grace and were accepted into the fold. They could express their religious convictions, offer professions of faith, seek baptism and join the church – and their names could be recorded in “the book” – they may have thought it was the Lamb’s Book of Life but it really was the church clerk’s record book. Just the recording of names within the book accorded the enslaved a degree of human dignity, of recognition and acknowledgment which they did not find in the larger world. In the Baptist churches they found that even in chains they were “free indeed” in Christ. They were members of the earthly church and bound for the heavenly land. They had come into the Kingdom of God! They received from the church a spiritual education which provided sustenance in their state and elevated them – if only within their psychic – to a greater sense of worth.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Colonial Virginia there was only one church permitted by law – the Anglican Church, the Church of England which was the Established Church of Virginia. Baptists were tolerated at times and in certain places and they openly were persecuted – beaten, whipped, imprisoned – at other times and in other places. Most of those persecutions were aimed at white Baptists and especially to the preachers. Some 40 Baptists, again primarily ministers, were imprisoned or otherwise severely persecuted. But we also have found an account of African slaves stripped and whipped for having dared to hear a Baptist minister preaching from his jail window. And so, the blacks also paid a price for religious liberty.

The people of the Established Church considered the Baptists to be the lowest of the low, the meanest of the mean. Some reckoned that if you would leave these dissenters alone they would fall out among the selves and surely their religious society would come to nothing in the end. In the mid to late-1700s Baptists in Virginia tended to be anti-slavery either for economic or moral reasons. Although the Anglicans despised the Baptists they seemed content to send their slaves to the Baptists for spiritual education. And the Africans found a welcoming attitude among the Baptists. I believe the Africans felt at home within the Baptist churches of Virginia because they and the white Baptists shared the same social strata of those who were despised by the ruling class. Surely the blacks recognized that the white Baptists were held in contempt and they must have **felt some affinity**.

They also found **an appealing worship style** which was lively and spirited as compared to Anglican services. The white Baptists of the 1700s were given to whoops and hollers and heart-warming hymns and the black Baptists used to being demonstrative in their own African religions must have felt at home. The white **Baptists were welcoming** to the blacks as if they had illuminated the front porch of the meetinghouse. In some churches blacks were appointed deacons, albeit over their own people. In many of the churches there was separate seating which accounts for the addition of galleries to many a country meeting house. The churches without balconies often put up a partition to separate the races although we have found accounts of blacks and whites sitting on the same pews and thinking nothing of it. We found one interesting account of a church which had separate seating in the usual pattern with the whites on the first floor and the blacks in the balcony but which decided on at least one given Sunday to switch. Maybe the whites just wanted to experience the worship service from a different vantage point.

After studying the period, we also have concluded that the vast majority of blacks participated in worship services held outdoors in arbors. We have read reminiscences of white Baptist preachers who made regular appointments to preach on scattered farms. It makes sense. After all, most of the country churches had more black members on the roll than they had seating; and it would have been challenging at best to transport and accommodate huge numbers of slave worshippers. We are told that most slaves on the farms and plantations were given one outfit of clothing for a year and, therefore, they probably would not have had clean clothing to

make them presentable in church. We believe that the slaves who attended church services were the trusted house servants and carriage drivers.

In 1890, the founder of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Charles Hill Ryland, requested white ministers who had preached to blacks in slave days to write their remembrances. These were placed in the files of the Historical Society and until our “free indeed!” project, they were not used. They provide a first-person, eye-witness account, albeit paternalistic and from the white perspective, of a relationship between the races within the Baptist community.

William Cauthorn Hall was one of those ministers who recorded his memories. Let me share just a few of his remembrances from the entire document which we have included in the “free indeed!” book. These are William Hall’s words:

“I have never seen the day when the worship of God was not as free for the black people as for the whites. A great deal of preaching in those early days for whites as well as blacks was done under arbors with rough seats both in summer and winter. The negroes attended as freely as the white people and generally in larger numbers. There were no restraints imposed upon them, so far as I know, but the negroes kept together in the congregation and if they were sometimes crowded into the white part of the congregation there was no complaint made about it. I have seen the master and servant occupying the same seat and worshipping together. The negroes did not seek those places and push themselves into them, but where room was wanting it was accorded to them, and no one thought of objecting to the partial mingling together. They were worshipping God, and social distinctions were ignored.”

“Sometimes masters and servants would be converted at the same meeting and in the joy of their first love all distinctions were lost sight of, and they rejoiced together in the love of a common Saviour. This religious familiarity did not appear to have the least tendency to interfere with the relations existing between master and servant, but only made them feel more interested in each other. The master felt for his servant the kindness of a Christian brother, and the feeling was reciprocated by the servant. There relations were made more desirable and their interests mutually advanced by the grace of God in their hearts.”

“It was always the custom of the negroes to treat everything about religion with the greatest reverence. I never heard one make a joke of anything that was sacred, and the songs of those who professed religion were piously religious. They sung wildly sometimes but the songs were religious...”

The white minister’s recollections were lengthy and he laboriously had written it in long hand. When transcribed and then set into a smaller font, it still took up 25 pages of our “free indeed!” book. Allow me to read one passage which gives a word-picture of the times. It took place at a country church about 50 miles or so from the state capitol and I have spoken at that church and can picture the scene from 163 years ago. The pastor of the church, William H. Taylor, is buried just in front of the stately brick church and his grave is surrounded by an iron fence and maintained as a shrine. Here is how William Hall described the scene:

“I was assisting Rev. Wm. H. Taylor in a protracted meeting held [in 1850] at Mount Zion church, in Buckingham county, of which he was pastor. On that morning a large crowd had gathered and as the church would not hold all the whites, provision had been made for the negroes in the grove. There were four preachers present beside the pastor, and he requested that one of them should go to the grove and preach. I told him that I would go if it was his wish.”

“He replied, ‘No, my brother, I want you to preach in the house this morning, and besides that, you are not a good negro preacher, I know that, if you don’t.’ After further consultation, seeing that the other brothers were unwilling to go, I told him that he had better send me, and that I would do the best I could for them.”

“When we went forward the negroes were singing the hymn commencing ‘Jesus I love thy charming name,’ which always had an inspiring effect upon me. I took my position by the side of a log on the lowest extreme of the congregation. I was accustomed to preaching under similar circumstances and tried to shake off the wet blanket that Bro. Taylor had unintentionally thrown over me, which was forgotten as soon as the services commenced.”

“We had several hymns sung and prayers offered before the sermon. One of the hymns, ‘Am I a soldier of the cross,’ was sung so heartily and followed by an earnest soul stirring prayer, that I felt really anxious to begin the part assigned to me in the service. Here I will make an extract from my journal of that date, ‘Preached in the morning to the colored people...from Acts 4:12. ‘Prepare to meet thy God.’ Had much liberty in speaking to them and hope that much good was done. While I was preaching to them I could see the tears running down their cheeks...”

“When I commenced my sermon, I felt in my heart that the Lord was with me. He gave me unusual liberty in saying before the minds of the listening crowd a plain presentation of gospel truth. It was my aim to impact sufficient light for salvation to every one present if they should never hear another sermon. There was no excitement on the part of any. I talked to the people as the Lord enabled me, and I have never seen more earnest attention in any congregation before or since. I had reason to believe that the truth spoken was according to the mind of the Spirit, and that the people’s hearts were opened to receive it. The Lord was manifestly with us. I enjoyed it then and it does my heart good now to remember the happy occasion.”

“At the close of my sermon I requested that one of the colored brethren should lead in prayer. ...such a prayer I have seldom ever heard. As we walked back to the church [one of the ministers] said to me, ‘If that man’s prayer is answered, neither you or any of your descendants will ever lack any good thing in this world or in the world to come.’ [Another man said] ‘Yes and if they will do as you have told them not one of them will be lost.’ I preached in the church that afternoon with encouraging success, but I did not enjoy the presence of the Lord as I did in the morning. I thank the Lord for the many similar sermons in my ministry...”

In a search of the hundreds of old records, we have found that very rarely was the word “slave” used. The churches referred to them as “servants.” It was a euphemism in a society which did not want to acknowledge the very practice upon which it was established – in other words, they would deny slavery by calling slaves “servants.” In early church records the black members often were listed along with the whites; but in time, most clerks made separate listings of white and “colored” males and females. In most cases, the clerks recorded the names of the slave owners beside the name of the slave member – and in most of those early records, the slave owners were not Baptists and, therefore, not members of that Baptist church. Slaves had to produce a permission slip from their master in order to be baptized which seems contrary to Baptist principles and doctrine; however, it was another acknowledgement that in view of society and the law, the slaves were considered property. No one would want to put another person’s property at risk by placing it under water! We also have read letters from slave owners to the Baptist pastor offering an assessment of the slave’s genuine or seemingly lack of sincerity in their professed conversion. One such letter praised one servant for his profession of faith and cautioned that another’s was mere superstition and suggested that the latter slave needed pastoral counseling.

Let it be forever said that the blacks found the releasing presence of Jesus Christ within the Baptist experience and it was a spiritual release which enabled them to survive in the world beyond church walls. Yes, they were “free indeed” in Christ, a freedom which transcended everything and lasted forever. It was the ultimate expression of freedom.

The earthly reality was quite different from the inward spiritual freedom. But actual physical freedom could have come much earlier. If the country had followed the lead of Virginia Baptists, slavery might have been abolished much sooner and a war averted. Indeed if the membership of the Virginia Baptist churches had followed their own leadership, the course of history may have been different.

In 1785 the General Committee, which was an early Virginia Baptist attempt at organization, passed a resolution declaring “hereditary slavery to be contrary to the word of God.” Five years later, in 1790, the General Committee, endorsed a resolution authored by John Leland, the great Baptist statesman, which condemned slavery and urged that “the horrid evil” be removed. Leland believed so strongly in his own resolution that he owned no slaves and instead worked his children on his farm. There were others who opposed slavery in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; but in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes and politics hardened in defense of the peculiar institution. Also, we have concluded that it was not so much that the Baptists became pro-slavery as it was that more slave owners became Baptists so their view in time predominated.

In the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, Virginia Baptists, actually were in a word, abolitionists. In the exhibit is the resolution authored by John Leland and adopted by Virginia Baptists which condemned slavery as an evil and sought for its abolishment. The document was written 75 years before emancipation. These are the words which John Leland wrote and which Virginia Baptists adopted: “Resolved, that slavery is a violent deprivation of the rights of Nature, and inconsistent with a republican government; and therefore recommend it to our brethren to make use of every legal measure, to extripate the horrid evil from the land, and pray Almighty God, that our Honourable Legislature may have it in their power, to proclaim the general jubilee, consistent with the principles of good policy.”

Another anti-slavery Virginia Baptist minister of the period was David Barrow, one of the persecuted ministers. He wrote and published a pamphlet in 1808 in which he condemned the practice of slavery. He also authored his own political creed in which he stated: “holding, tyrannizing and driving slaves I view as contrary to the laws of God and nature.” In his creed, he wrote; “I believe the natural equality of man, except in some monstrous cases.” He envisioned “that desirable time when [slaves] will be delivered from the iron talons of their task-masters and joyfully put off the galling yoke of slavery.” Eventually he left Virginia for the frontier of Kentucky where he could work his own children on the farm and not endure ridicule of his neighbors for not owning slaves.

Another evidence of the anti-slavery attitude of 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia Baptists is found in the minutes of 1797 of the Dover Baptist Association – which once was the largest district association of Baptists in the world - in which churches were encouraged “to unite with the Abolition Society in proposing gradual emancipation.”

With Leland’s resolution on everyone’s mind, the Baptists of the Roanoke Association met in June 1790 and adopted the following resolution: “Respecting the strong remonstrances Against slavery, and the manner in which they have taken it up unanimously agreed to remonstrate, as Christians, against oppression as we discover

the same, and that we are heartily disposed to be under the influence of the spirit of humanity, yet nevertheless, we believe it would be a very gross violation thereof... to emancipate our slaves promiscuously without means or visible prospects of their support. That tho' we are not unanimously clear in our minds whether the God of nature ever intended, that one Part of the human species should be held in an abject state of slavery to another part of the same species: yet the subject to us is so very abstruse and such a set of complex circumstances attending the same, that we suppose [neither] the general committee nor any other Religious Society whatever has the least right to concern therein as a society, but leave every individual to act at discession. In order to keep a good conscience before God, as far as the Laws of our [land] will admit; and that it is the indispensable duty of masters to forbear and suppress cruelty, and do that which is just and equal to their servants."

Some of the Baptist associations shied from the topic. Some shunted it off to the state, declaring that it was a matter for the legislature and not for a religious society. Some were more discerning and forthcoming. The Portsmouth Association in 1796 declared that man's greatest problem was "covetousness" and proceeded to explain: "Covetousness leads Christians, with the people of this country in general, to hold and retain, in abject slavery, a set of our poor fellow creatures, contrary to the laws of God and nature." The next year, in the summer of 1797, the Baptists in Northern Virginia's Kettocton Association had laid their crops by and were ready to consider the fate of those folks who labored on the crops. They answered a query from a church about Divine Law. "Is Hereditary Slavery a transgression of the Divine Law? Answered in the affirmative. Is not the Bondage of the Africans amongst us, a species of Hereditary Slavery? And consequently, the continuation of the practice a transgression of the Divine Law? Answered also in the affirmative."

The Kettocton appointed a committee consisting of six of their most prominent members and asked for a plan of gradual emancipation. The committee drafted such a plan which included the following provisions:

1. All slaves 14 years and under to be free at 22 years of age.
2. All above 14, and under 20, to be free at 25.
3. All above 20, and under 25, to be free at 28.
4. All above 25, to serve 5 years.
5. All born after this date shall be entitled to the same rights and privileges as children born of Negroes before heretofore emancipated.
6. All who have been purchased with money, shall serve ten years from the time of such purchase.

By the next year, the association had succumbed to the idea that such a plan among church members was not practical and the whole concept of emancipation should be left to the legislature.

The generation was that so adamant in pushing for an end to slavery was passing off the scene. It had been the same generation which had provided the foot soldiers for the Revolution against England. It was a generation of enlightened ideas. It was led among the Baptists by courageous pastors who practiced what they preached and abhorred the ownership of a human being by another human being. But the leaders of that generation were leaving Virginia – Leland for his native state of Massachusetts and Barrow for Kentucky.

In the 1700s, there were numerous African preachers including "Negro Lewis" of the Northern Neck of Virginia, and in the Historical Society's collection there is an account of his preaching to about 300 people and displaying his preaching gifts which "exceeded many white preachers." The account comes from one of the most valuable items in our collection, an 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscript book called Dozier's Textbook. Richard Dozier was the overseer for the wealthiest man in Colonial Virginia, Robert Carter; and Dozier had a hobby. He enjoyed going

to hear Baptist preachers and recording their sermon texts and noting the results of the sermons. In Dozier's Textbook there is an entry for May 26, 1782, in which he wrote: "I went in the evening to hear a negro speak...(called Lewis). He spake by the way of [exhorting] to abt. 400. I think with the greatest sensibility I ever expected to hear from an Ethiopian he pointed out the state man was in by nature and laid before us the Evidence of a sinful nature... and entreated them to rest not in a unconverted state but come & accept X [Christ] by faith that they might be reconciled of God."

Another remarkable black preacher of the times was Jacob Bishop who served for awhile as a minister of a mixed congregation in Portsmouth, Virginia. He attended the meetings of the Portsmouth Baptist Association in the 1790s. From the history of the Kehukee Baptist Association there is this description of Bishop: "...and in 1795, there came a black preacher from Northampton county, in Virginia, whose name was Jacob Bishop. The brethren and friends in that county gave him money to buy his freedom, which he did; and soon after bought his wife's. And when he came to Norfolk he bought his eldest son's freedom. His preaching was much admired both by saints and sinners, for some time wherever he went."

In 1792 the Roanoke Baptist Association actually purchased a man named Simon in order to set him free to preach. The Association explained: "We think him ordained of God to preach the Gospel..." The original manuscript book is in our exhibit and thus far it is the only reference we can discover to this black preacher named Simon.

Indeed for most of the blacks mentioned in our name registry the notation from the old church records remains the only evidence that they ever existed. Their names cry out to us to let us know that they once walked the same ground and declared the same faith.

All of the advancements for black preachers and black congregations were challenged after the Nat Turner insurrection of 1831 in Southampton County, Va. The state passed harsh laws requiring the presence of white males if blacks gathered for worship and for white pastors to preside over black congregations. In that period, Robert Ryland, a white minister and president of the Baptist school, Richmond College, became the pastor of the First African Baptist Church of Richmond which was a large congregation of upwards of 2700 members.

Ryland wrote his own catechism for the blacks and a copy is in the exhibit. Published in 1848, it is titled *The Scripture Catechism for Coloured People*. It covers questions on the Bible and Christian doctrine which can be answered by a simple yes or no; but Ryland also expected his congregants to give the Scripture text to back up their answer so in an age when to teach reading and writing to slaves was illegal, they must have memorized the answers. It has been interesting to watch people as they tried to answer the questions in the catechism. Many 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians would not be able to know all the answers.

Here is a sample of some of the questions and answers:

"Question: Is the belief of a God the first step necessary for us to be religious? YES He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and the he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. Heb. xi. 6

Has God revealed himself to mankind? YES That which may be known of God is manifest unto them; for God showed it unto them. Rom 1.19

Was this revelation through his works sufficient to teach man the saving knowledge of God? YES The heavens declare the glory of God... There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard... Their line has gone out through all the earth. Psalm xix.2-4"

Maybe we need a negative answer. Here is another question: “Did this revelation come from human wisdom? NO The prophecy came not in old time by the will of men; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” 2 Pet. 1.21

There were numerous stories of one-on-one relationships between blacks and whites. One of the interesting stories comes from a church named Nomini in Westmoreland County, Virginia. An itinerant preacher named Henry Toler came into the area while a Mr. Samuel Templeman was away on business. Toler converted Templeman’s mother and wife or as he later recalled the situation: “On my return it appeared to me that the world was turned upside down. I found the whole family alarmed and earnestly inquiring what they should do to be saved.” Among those who had been converted was his “favorite servant-man” named Cupid. The servant got religion in a powerful way and began exhorting himself to the other slaves.

“I could hear him at all hours of night singing, and it tormented me. On a Sunday night I heard a loud talking in the kitchen, and went round back of the house to listen, and lo! He was lamenting his poor master’s situation, that if he died unconverted, he would be eternally miserable; it raised my anger to such a pitch, I came to the resolution that I would, in the morning, chastise him for his insolence. Thus, I returned, and to bed. I have often wondered at the goodness and forbearance of God. In the morning, by light, I took my whip, and went to the stable, determined to execute my threat. The moment I set foot on the sill of the door, I caught his eye fixed on me; he was a very humble man. ‘Master,’ says he, ‘I hope you won’t be angry; I want to talk with you.’ I was disarmed in a moment, and told him he might say what he pleased; I dropped my whip, and have never seen it since. He commenced with his experience, (the first I have ever heard); I found something working in my heart that I had never felt before, assenting to the truth of what he said. I was thoroughly convinced that if I died without such religion as Cupid had experienced, I should be miserable forever; he broke out in a warm exhortation, and I was obliged to turn away, lest Cupid should see my tears. I returned to the house, and told my wife that if she would get the Bible and call the family together, I would try to worship God. This was joyful news to her.”

Samuel Templeman – converted through the testimony of his slave – became a Christian and, in short order, a Baptist minister. He preached and ministered throughout a large territory encompassing some four counties and had a lasting influence upon the region.

There were about 20 independent black Baptist churches in Virginia prior to emancipation but most of the blacks were in mixed congregations. One of the independent churches was Second African Baptist Church of Richmond which came from Second Baptist Church, a church constituted in 1820. Twenty-six years after its founding, the black members – some 57 – formed a separate church. This was five years after the First Church had helped create First African for its black members, a move which nearly cost the white pastor, Jeremiah Bell Jeter, his position and his reputation among the other clergy of the city.

The Second African Church had a chapel which the white members of Second had their slaves build for the new church. Like the First African, the Second African was served by a white pastor until after the Civil War. Among the treasurers found within the minutes of the mother church, Second, is the original constitution of the new black Second church. It is the only written constitution that we have discovered of one of Virginia’s antebellum black Baptist churches. Among the articles in the constitution is the following: “The Second Baptist Church shall annually appoint a committee of twenty-four male members to aid in the religious instruction & discipline of the Second Coloured Baptist Church. The Pastor of this Church shall be a white Baptist minister of

good standing...selected by a majority of the members of the Coloured Church, and approved by the committee of the Second (White) church. Meetings for public worship must be held in the day time..." The new church was received into the local district association.

In an age when church discipline was the order of the day, the old church records contain examples of blacks being disciplined – just as whites were disciplined – for a variety of infractions. Some were excommunicated and just like the whites, the blacks often expressed repentance and were readmitted into the fellowship. There were even cases of blacks bringing their masters before the church for offenses against them. In 1772 the Meherrin Baptist Church in Lunenburg County heard a case of inappropriate behavior. A married slave couple accused their white mistress of "the sin of anger & unchristian language" as well as parting a black man and his wife. The mistress expressed her regret and the church and the black couple accepted it.

In 1780 at a church business meeting at South Quay Baptist Church in Southampton County, a slave owner named John brought charges against his slave Nero for disobedience and harsh language. Nero also brought charges against the master for misconduct. Both were censured by the church.

In 1842-43, the long winter was made livelier at Sperryville Baptist Church in the mountains of Rappahannock County. A female servant confided to someone that her master had made "corrupt propositions." When brought before the church, the master insisted that he was merely testing the servant's virtue and "did not intend to carry out his proposition to the woman if she had assented."

The very fact that blacks could dare to bring charges against their masters within a Baptist church indicated the heightened freedom which they experienced within the membership.

In his *Virginia Chronicle* of 1790, John Leland indicted the attitude regarding slave marriages. He wrote: "The marriage of slaves is a subject not known in our code of laws. What promises so ever they make, their masters may and do part them at pleasure. If their marriages are as sacred as the marriages of freemen, the slaves are guilty of adultery when they part voluntarily, and the masters are guilty of a sin as great when they part them involuntary, and yet while they are property, it is not in the power of the masters to prevent their being forced apart."

The Baptist General Committee considered the matter of slave marriages in a statement of 1788. Before the Committee was the question: "Is it allowable for a member possessing slaves who are about to remove to a distant part of the world, and for such member to part man and wife?" The answer: "It is not allowable and when a member is about to remove he shall use his utmost endeavors to keep man and wife together, and if such a member fails therein, he shall be dealt with as an offender and excluded from society." Coan Baptist Church in Westmoreland County altered the wedding vows of slaves to read: "... until death or removal."

Another related issue to marriages was the selling of slaves and the destruction of family structure. State laws did not recognize slave marriages but the churches did or otherwise they would have been condoning adultery. In 1817 one of the country churches – Lyle's Baptist Church in Fluvanna County – described a situation in which a white member had sold "his negro man Phil" and it resulted in "a burden on the church." In the selling of a slave, a church member was torn away from the fellowship. Once slaves were relocated they could produce their "church letter" in seeking membership in another Baptist church.

David Roper, the founding pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, “disposed” of a slave in 1821 and the church considered the question of “whether the Church conceives any circumstances that will justify a member of this Church in purchasing or selling a Slave?” The church concluded: “Resolved that we do not regard the late disposal of a slave by Bro. D. Roper to be either reprehensible or contrary to any regulation of the Church.”

In 1837 Antioch, a church in the plantation country of Charlotte County, decided “that we view the practice of trading in slaves for the sole purpose of gain as contrary to the spirit of the Gospel & to its interest, therefore we will not hereafter connive at it in our Members.”

What was the status of the blacks – slave or free – within the churches? They were members but the churches were governed by white males. It would be decades after the War before white females participated in business sessions. They largely were penniless yet in some cases masters allowed their slaves to work extra time and earn small amounts of money. There was more opportunity for this among town and city slaves who labored in industries. With a few cents in their pockets, the black members were expected to contribute to the church and its causes. In the journal of the missionary Luther Rice in 1819-20 there is a notation that he received a small amount of money for missions from “a free woman of color.” At Emmaus Baptist Church in New Kent County, “the colored members” presented a request “that they might be allowed to contribute towards defraying the expense of the church, and that the church should say how much and when it should be paid.” The church decided that fifty cents per quarter for a free person and 12 ½ cents per quarter for a slave was a worthy offering unto the Lord.

In many churches blacks were appointed as deacons, albeit having oversight of their own race. In the early 1800s, Williamsburg African Church and Gillfield – a large and important independent black church in the city of Petersburg – both inquired of their district associations whether slaves could serve as deacons. It was determined that they could have the same service in a church as a free person.

One of the epoch stories out of Virginia during slavery is the colonization movement. For some it appealed as a great humanitarian project. For others it was a convenient way to rid the state of the slave problem and the blacks themselves who by that time were not native Africans but persons born in what had become the United States of America. They were Americans and Virginians even if they did not have the status of citizenship.

One such native Virginian was Lott Cary who was born in 1780 a slave in Charles City County, an area of vast plantations between Williamsburg and Richmond. At his grandmother’s knee he had learned about the One in whom all men and women are “free indeed.” He came to Richmond to work in the tobacco warehouses and joined the First Baptist Church of the city. He soon began preaching “at candlelight” at First Church. The famous missionary Luther Rice even encouraged him and loaned him money which the black minister repaid. His master allowed him to earn money and in time he accumulated enough to purchase his own freedom and that of his wife and son.

Lott Cary and his friend, Collin Teague, and others were taught in an evening school conducted by William Crane, a white Baptist who was a member of the Second church of Richmond. Crane encouraged Cary and Teague to consider going to Liberia. The little group met in Crane’s house and constituted the first Baptist church for Monrovia, Liberia, calling it Providence. The new church was transplanted from Richmond to Africa. Lott Cary’s story in Liberia assured him a place in history.

Another fascinating story out of the colonization movement is the freeing of the slaves of a Baptist minister by the name of Thaddeus Herndon of Northern Virginia. He and his wife, Mary Fannie, freed slaves worth, in crass material terms, some \$30,000 which was a fortune. But the rest of the story reflects a humanitarian spirit. The Herndons bought their freed slaves the good they would need – clothing, bedding, tools, equipment and books including a family Bible for each family. Thaddeus reckoned that there was a bond between him and his slaves: “We have lived together,” he declared. “We have grown up together.” The Herndons transported their slaves to the ship, held a prayer meeting on the ship, and Mary Fannie gave each family a journal book in which she had recorded that slave family’s history, noting the dates when their children were born. To one of the slaves, a man named Washington, the former master pleaded: “Write to me, Washington, you can write. I have furnished you with paper. Keep a journal.”

The Liberia movement was fraught with controversy, crises and disasters. It also had its brighter side in the planting of a Baptist witness in the country. By 1857 the Liberia Baptist Association listed 17 member churches with nearly 1,000 members. Many of the prominent Liberian Baptists were from Virginia and indeed one section of the country was named Virginia.

In our exhibit we placed a copy of the constitution of the Republic of Liberia printed in Philadelphia in 1848. It contained some revolutionary ideas that had not found full expression in the land they had left. Section 1 read: “All men are born equally free and independent and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights among which are the rights of enjoying and defending life and liberty, of acquiring, possessing and protecting property and of pursuing and obtaining safety and happiness.” Section 3: “All men have a natural and inalienable right to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences, without obstruction or molestation from others...” Section 4: “There shall be no slavery within this Republic. Nor shall any citizen of this Republic, or any person resident therein, deal in slaves...” It all sounded Jeffersonian but without deception.

The four years of war by whatever name Southerners and Northerners chose to call it created destruction in Virginia where much of the battles were fought and affected the Baptist churches. Congregations were depleted; white males went off to fight; meeting houses were destroyed; records were lost; and several ministers were imprisoned. As Union forces swept through some areas, blacks ran away or as the records of Walnut Grove Baptist Church near Richmond state: “Gone with the enemy.”

By war’s end, the course of rebuilding began. In our exhibit we placed the eye-witness account of Julia Wilber, a member of the Rochester [New York] Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society who visited the former Confederate capital a month after it fell. She brought boxes of clothing to place upon the walking skeletons of the emancipated folk. She wrote: “As soon as the slaves were made free by the advance of the Union army, the masters refused to keep the old and disabled who had been worn out in their service, and sent them to this place to die. They also turned off the sick and the young children. Some of the old people looked more like moving bundles of rags than like human beings.” She gave away 600 new garments to the people.

The blacks were now free indeed – even free to form their own churches and, in time, associations and state conventions. There were some whites who wanted to perpetuate the old order and were reluctant for the blacks to leave the churches. The Rappahannock Association in an area of large farms and plantations met in the summer of ’65 and accepted the following report: “The issue of the war has not changed, or even in the least modified, our views with reference to the scriptural Lawfulness of slavery. Southern Christians have always drawn their defense of the institution from the word of God... The time may have, and probably has, arrived, when God sees fit in His excellent wisdom, to abolish slavery in this country...” When one of the member

churches advanced the inquiry as to whether or not its black members should be required or encouraged to withdraw membership, the Rappahannock decided “that separate organizations of the colored members of our churches, should, at present, neither be required nor encouraged.”

On the other hand, in the Appomattox Association, another area with large black population, Daniel Witt – one of the fathers of the Baptist General Association of Virginia – recommended that “the churches, quietly and promptly, organize their colored membership into separate and independent churches, and endeavor to exert such a supervision over them as is consistent with their separate and independent organization.”

The Middle District Association just below Richmond tried its best to retain the Midlothian African Church and prevent its withdrawing. “We believe that such a course will be injurious alike to the church and the religious interests of the colored people within the circle of its influence. Convicted of this fact, we feel that an earnest effort should be put forth to dissuade them from their present intention.”

But the blacks were gone. At first, there was a mass exodus from the mixed churches and out of the existing associations. Some few blacks remained in some of the churches until as late as the 1880s.

Immediately after the war, two district associations were formed by the free people: the Shiloh around Richmond and the Norfolk Union for the Tidewater region. They were mirror images of the earlier associations which now would be composed of white churches. In its first report, the Shiloh in August 1865 listed the number of church members within its ranks as 9,674 and the number in Sunday schools was about 2,500. In three years, the Shiloh listed a total membership of 25,122 within 75 churches. In 1868 the Norfolk Union Association listed 11,767 members.

Within the first five years after emancipation, there were about 250 new churches planted by the blacks, a tremendous undertaking by a people who had been considered as inferior.

In addition, the blacks were adamant that their ministers receive theological education and a seminary was started in what had been the infamous slave jail in Richmond. A black Baptist newspaper was published, calling itself the Shiloh Herald, in contrast to the existing Religious Herald with its white editors and white subscribers. In our exhibit we placed the first issue of the newspaper and the Shiloh Herald declared that it entered “the arena of journalism with malice to none and charity to all, not as a rival but as an aider.” The black Baptist denomination in Virginia had been birthed.

The founder, publisher and editor of the Shiloh Herald was a fascinating man named Henry Williams. He was born a child of free parents in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, on Oct. 13, 1831. Just two months earlier Nat Turner, a slave preacher, led an insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in which about 60 whites were killed. The short-lived rebellion created widespread fear among white Virginians. Severe laws were passed which restricted activities of blacks. No longer could they gather for worship unless there were white men present. No longer could they be taught to read and write. Henry Williams’ parents decided to flee to Ohio and there Henry spent his youth.

The story was handed down that as a youth he ran away from home to visit Africa. He soon became homesick and boarded the first ship back to America. He pictured the scene for his hearers: “On reaching the ship, my manner of getting aboard was to be by climbing a rope. There I was, dangling between the sky and the sea with hungry sharks awaiting my fall. I finally succeeded in getting aboard.” It was after reaching home that he became converted to Christianity and soon began preparation to enter the ministry.

Without benefit of formal education, he was self-taught and self-made. He became an itinerant missionary and traveled on foot including a missionary journey of 40 miles. He joined the secretive Underground Railroad and “personally led and transported on his back and shoulders many of his race from one station to another on the way to Canada, traveling day and night, through rain and snow.”

In 1865, with the Civil War over, he made a missionary journey as far as Petersburg. He happened to meet someone from Gilfield Baptist Church, an independent black Baptist church which dates to perhaps 1797, who invited him to preach. It seems that the church was “waiting for a pastor to whom a call had been extended and whose arrival was long overdue.” The expected new pastor never arrived and Henry Williams suddenly found himself called as the pastor. It was November 1865. His wife, Madeline Carter Williams, joined him and a new era began in the life of Gilfield and for black Baptists in Virginia.

Annie Williams, a contemporary of the pastor and a teacher in the Sunday school, once recalled that upon his arrival in Petersburg, “in a speech on the Poplar Lawn, now Central Park, he advised us as a people just liberated, to devote ourselves, our time, our all, to material progress, the acquisition of prosperity, trades and education, and above all to make friends of our neighbors among whom we live, rather than seek political advancement.” She continued: “In fact [pastor urged us] to leave politics alone. From this he made enemies. But did he not see the end from the beginning?”

“His strong points were a wealth of common sense, an incompatible honesty, steadfast in honorable purpose, an untiring industry, all supplemented by the highest order of physical, moral and Christian courage. He was of the stuff martyrs are made.”

A newspaper in his time also admitted that the Baptist pastor had his enemies but added: “They were enemies because he told them the truth.”

In 1870 he was elected to the Petersburg City Council. And in the same year he launched *The Shiloh Herald*, which declared on its masthead that it was “devoted to vital godliness and sound morality.”

Gilfield members revered him. Through personal appeals and hard work, he led the church which had about 1,200 when he arrived to receive 5,781 new members with 4,455 by baptism at his hands. He not only was the pastor but also the superintendent of the church’s large and vital Sunday school which enrolled about 700. At one point the church members took up a special collection to furnish the pastor with a horse and buggy to be used in visiting the flock.

Henry Williams was a recognizable figure on the streets of Petersburg. He was a physically big man, slightly stooped, and possessed a commanding voice. In his long pastorate he kept the church and school “free from broils, factions and dismemberment and free from debt.” In the 1870s he led the church to build a large new building which was debt-free within a year. He even suggested that the church make its own bricks to save costs. During his pastorate, the church established four branches in the countryside beyond Petersburg. He was considered the father of the Virginia Baptist State Convention and the organizer of two district associations of black churches.

Within his community, he led a movement to hire black teachers for black schools. He took a particular interest in the poor of Petersburg and found ways to help them.

He served Gilfield Baptist Church for 34 years until his death in February 1900 at age 68. He witnessed tremendous changes within his own lifetime as slavery vanished and freedom offered new challenges.

In the minutes of the Norfolk Union for 1868 there was a greeting from Williams of the Shiloh. He summarized the spirit of the black Baptists of Virginia: “Pray for us, dear brethren, that peace may dwell within our walls and prosperity within our palaces, and that we may all stand fast in the liberties wherein we have been made free, and that we may not again be entangled in the yoke of bondage.” Henry Williams might as well have said: We are free indeed!

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Acknowledgement is made to my colleague, R. Michael Whitt, special projects assistant at the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, who followed through with his assignment to compile the name registry and who wrote the narrative which the Society published under the title “free indeed!”

Relishing their new full freedom, the blacks constituted new churches, associations, a newspaper, a seminary and eventually a college.

It has taken 150 years for black and white Baptists to begin to form a new humanity. More and more traditionally black churches are joining the General Association or, at least, becoming dually aligned with it and the historically black state associations, the State Convention and the General Convention. It is almost as if the porch light has been turned on and the welcoming mat swept.