

“The Voice of Faithful Tradition”: The Madison-Leland Legend in Nineteenth-Century Print

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*T*he story goes like this. In late October 1787, the Virginia General Assembly called for a statewide convention to consider ratification of the recently completed federal Constitution. Each county in the state would choose two delegates to represent it at the convention scheduled to begin the following June. Many Virginians urged James Madison, chief author of the new Constitution, to stand for election in Orange County, Virginia. With some initial reluctance, Madison agreed. Baptists of Orange County, however, initially opposed ratification, believing that the document (still without the Bill of Rights) did not contain a sufficient guarantee of religious freedom. At the head of this opposition was the itinerant preacher John Leland, a Massachusetts native who had gained a reputation as one of Virginia's most humorous, shrewd, and compelling ministers.¹ Some speculated Leland might even challenge Madison directly by launching his own anti-ratification candidacy. Madison remained in New York in the weeks prior to the election, but at the urging of his father and other friends, he returned to Orange County to answer his critics and secure the election. Madison's chief order of business was to meet with Leland. If the leader of the Baptist opposition decided to support the Constitution, his change of opinion might well convince other like-minded citizens to support ratification and Madison's candidacy.

Here the details get hazy, so it is best momentarily to jump ahead to the end of the story. The citizens of Orange County overwhelming elect-

ed Madison (and another pro-ratification candidate) on 24 March 1788, with Leland's full support. Madison helped secure ratification in Virginia, and eventually advanced an amendment to the Constitution explicitly protecting religious freedom during Congress's first session. The question is, what exactly transpired between Madison and Leland in the days immediately prior to the election? Much has been written about a possible meeting between Madison and Leland on the eve of the Orange County election. By the mid-nineteenth century, local histories and Baptist folklore celebrated the meeting as a defining moment of Baptist efforts for religious liberty. If you were reared in a Baptist family in the nineteenth century, chances were you knew the story of John Leland and took pride in the role that Baptists played in ensuring that the new federal Constitution included a more robust guarantee of religious liberty. Yet only circumstantial evidence exists to prove that such a meeting actually occurred. Leland and Madison never explicitly mentioned the meeting in their own writings. Questions concerning the meeting's most pertinent details remain without definitive answers. When and where did the two meet? Was Leland an official candidate in the Orange County race? Did Madison successfully win Leland's support by the end of their meeting, or did a dramatic Election Day debate, held before the Orange County electorate, finally convince Leland to abandon his opposition to ratification? Historians continue to examine whether the meeting actually occurred and, if it did, to what extent it influenced the course of Constitutional ratification in Virginia and the entire nation.²

While this issue may never be fully resolved, I want instead to examine a related question that addresses the development and influence of the story of the Madison-Leland meeting. By analyzing nineteenth-century published accounts of the meeting, I hope to explain how the story took its present form, and why the Baptist denomination long cherished the legacy of Leland's commitment to religious freedom and his meeting with Madison.

I will focus specifically on ten written accounts of the Madison-Leland meeting published between 1836 and 1902, divided into three

groups.³ The first includes the two earliest published accounts, written by prominent political figures: Virginia's John Barbour and Massachusetts' George Briggs, and profoundly influential over the scope and content of subsequent accounts; the second consists of four accounts by leading Baptist preachers and educators; and the third includes four accounts written by non-Baptist authors. My close reading of these accounts focuses on the issues historians still debate – whether or not Leland was an official candidate for office, the immediate results of the meeting between Leland and Madison, and the nature of the events that transpired on Election Day itself. Yet by charting the early rise of the story in nineteenth-century print, and by contrasting later accounts authored by Baptists and non-Baptists, I primarily aim to explain why a distinct version of the Madison-Leland story solidified among Baptists, and what the accepted legacy of the meeting reveals about nineteenth-century American Baptists' sense of their denominational heritage and identity.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Leland had long been admired within the Baptist denomination as one of its staunchest defenders of religious liberty. His encounter with Madison on the eve of Constitutional ratification in Virginia, in the hands of later Baptist preacher-storytellers, bolstered his legacy as a significant defender of inalienable rights. It also confirmed eighteenth-century American Baptists' reputation as stalwart advocates of religious liberty. Here a comparison with accounts of the meeting written by non-Baptists is most instructive. Comparing the two sets of accounts both demonstrates the widespread influence of Barbour and Briggs and underscores the distinct components of Baptist-authored versions of the story. These distinctions emerged largely because of the importance of the Madison-Leland story in shaping and confirming a critical piece of denominational identity among Baptists in America. As Baptist leaders retold the story of Leland's famous encounter with Madison, they sought to highlight again Baptist involvement in Constitutional ratification, particularly the denomination's fervent and consequential demands for religious liberty. The history of the origins and development of the story of the Madison-Leland meeting, then, is not merely a history

of the story itself, but also of the power this story had in shaping and reinforcing a sense of denominational identity, heritage, and purpose among Baptists in America.

James Madison's death on 28 June 1836 inspired the earliest nineteenth-century printed accounts of his meeting with Leland. On 18 July 1836, John Strode Barbour publicly eulogized the fallen Founder in a memorial service held on the steps of the Culpeper County, Virginia courthouse. Barbour, a native of Culpeper County, was a practicing lawyer, sympathetic to Jacksonian policies, and a five-term member of the U.S. House of Representatives. A sizable crowd of local citizens attended the public memorial. Barbour's oration was well received and was printed on 2 August 1836 in the *Daily National Intelligencer*.⁴ The eulogy differed little from many others delivered across the nation upon Madison's death; a lengthy sketch of Madison's distinguished career concluded with a call to remember again the incalculable debt owed to the author of the Constitution, the fierce defender of inalienable rights.

"But for James Madison we should have no Constitution," Barbour declared near the end of his speech. "He, above all others, created it; he, above all others, gave it to the ratification of Virginia." It was here, when Barbour turned his attention to the ratification of the Constitution in Virginia, that the legend of the Madison-Leland meeting first explicitly appeared in nineteenth-century print. The fate of the Constitution rested upon ratification in Virginia, Barbour suggested, for "Without Virginia the Union was disjoined, and was no Union, had every other State accepted, adopted, and ratified the Constitution." Madison's election victory was essential to the success of the ratification cause, for he alone could defeat the mounting opposition to the Constitution. Yet Madison ensured his "election to the convention itself" only by his "sudden return to his county upon the eve of his election." Having returned to Orange County, Madison employed his "soft and assuasive and lucid elocution" to change the minds of "two ministers of the Gospel of the Baptist church" previously hostile to ratification.⁵ Of these two Baptist ministers, "the celebrated John Leland was one of them." Barbour said nothing

more about Leland, the other minister in attendance, or the nature of their meeting with Madison. He simply concluded that Leland's "mind was thrown open to the lights of reason and the power of argument," a change of opinion that proved "decisive in the election."

Barbour claimed to speak "but the voice of faithful tradition" in recounting Madison's meeting with Leland, his eventual support of Constitutional ratification, and the impact of this change of opinion on the Orange County election. Barbour's eulogy suggested that a last-minute meeting with Leland and another unnamed Baptist minister ensured Madison's once doubtful election victory. While Barbour ambiguously stated that the meeting occurred "on the eve of the election," he clearly declared that at the conclusion of the meeting, Madison had won Leland's support. Barbour, however, gave no indication as to whether or not Leland himself was also a candidate prior to his meeting with Madison. Later accounts often showed little moderation in assessing the effect of Leland's conversion to the cause of ratification; Barbour simply suggested that Leland's change was "decisive" to the election's outcome. Few details of the actual meeting were given, and Barbour entirely avoided a dramatic retelling of the events of Election Day. But then, Barbour's intention was never to venerate Leland or trumpet Baptist involvement in Constitutional ratification in Virginia. The primary purpose of his speech was to eulogize Madison.

George Nixon Briggs, a Whig politician from Massachusetts who served in the U.S. House of Representative (1831-1843) and as Governor of Massachusetts (1844-1851), provided the next significant printed account of the Madison-Leland meeting. Besides being an accomplished politician, Briggs was also a devout Baptist. He held fast to his Baptist upbringing throughout his later life, championing denominational efforts in overseas missions and moral reform, even serving as the president of the Baptist Missionary Union from 1847-1861. Briggs' active involvement in the Baptist denomination helps, in part, to explain the influence of his account on later Baptist-authored versions. Briggs' account, written in 1857 and published in 1860 in William Sprague's *Annals of the*

American Baptist Pulpit, was part of a much longer letter (written at Sprague's request) that amounted to a biographical sketch of Leland's life. This sketch drew heavily from an extended conversation Briggs had had with Leland more than twenty years earlier, sometime in 1837, soon after the *Daily National Intelligencer* reprinted Barbour's eulogy. Leland "spoke of many of the incidents in his long life" throughout the course of this conversation. Attention turned to Leland's meeting with Madison when Briggs' mentioned recently reading "in the public prints an extract from an Eulogy delivered by J.S. Barbour, of Virginia, upon the character of James Madison." Briggs informed Leland that Barbour "had said that the credit of adopting the Constitution of the United States properly belonged to a Baptist clergyman, formerly of Virginia, by the name of Leland." Briggs' letter proceeded to record Leland's reaction to Barbour's eulogy. His account was alone in claiming to record Leland's personal recollection of his meeting with Madison (Sprague 177-79).

"The State was nearly equally divided" at the time of ratification, Briggs wrote. It was not long before a somewhat reluctant Leland "was named as the candidate opposed to the adoption, and in opposition to Mr. Madison." Given that Orange County "was a strong Baptist County," Leland's friends "had an undoubting confidence in his election." Madison planned to return to Virginia just prior to Election Day, so the citizens of Orange County arranged for a public debate between candidates, yet prior to this public debate (presumably held on Election Day), "Mr. Madison went some distance out of his direct road to call upon [Leland]." Madison spent "half a day" with Leland, "fully and unreservedly" expressing his opinions, but to no avail. The two separated at day's end, their differences unresolved; they would not meet again until jointly addressing the citizens of Orange County as rival candidates (179-80).

Election Day saw "nearly all the voters in the County of Orange" turn up to hear the candidates discuss the important questions of ratification in Virginia. Madison first took the stump, "a hogshead of tobacco," and addressed his fellow citizens for two hours "in a calm, candid and statesman-like manner," responding to common contentions to ratifica-

tion. Once Madison finished, Leland's supporters called for him to respond, yet a momentous change of opinion had occurred. Leland took the hogshead "and went in for Mr. Madison; and he was elected without difficulty." Briggs' account provides no details as to why Leland was suddenly, drastically converted (180).

Although Leland informed Briggs that Barbour's eulogy "had given him too much credit," Briggs' account still highlighted Leland's decisive role in the Orange County election, and, by implication, the eventual ratification of the Constitution. Briggs concluded his letter with a lofty praise of Leland: "A noble Christian Patriot! That single act [supporting Madison's candidacy], with the motives which prompted it, and the consequences which followed it, entitle [Leland] to the respect of mankind" (179-80). It is not surprising that Briggs' letter to Sprague became one of the most influential and frequently cited retellings of the Madison-Leland meeting among Baptists. Briggs' reputation as one of Massachusetts' leading Baptists and Whig politicians lent credibility to his account. Moreover, its claim to being a direct retelling of Leland's own recollection of the meeting lent it complete reliability in the minds of many contemporaries.

Briggs' letter and Barbour's eulogy influenced the rise of the Madison-Leland meeting legend more profoundly than any other nineteenth-century printed accounts. Nearly all subsequent accounts drew heavily from one or both. The fact that well-respected political leaders authored the first two printed accounts of Madison's meeting with Leland lent early structure and validity to the story. Their accounts suggested that the story was not merely a far-fetched legend retold only by Baptist apologists, but one verified by leading American politicians. The discrepancies between these two accounts gave rise to the most hotly contested aspects of the legend. Barbour's eulogy mentioned nothing of Leland as a rival candidate; Briggs' letter, however, describes Leland as reluctantly yielding "to the solicitations of the opponents of the Constitution" in accepting their nomination (179). Barbour declared that by the conclusion of the meeting Madison had wholly convinced Leland to support the ratifi-

cation of the Constitution; Briggs suggested that Leland's mind was unresolved by the meeting's end – that it was not until Election Day itself, presumably just prior to voting, that Leland made known his support of Madison and the Constitution. While Briggs provided a detailed account of Election Day itself, Barbour did not, again suggesting that Madison had secured Leland's support the prior evening. Disagreements over these crucial details continue to the present day. But the longevity of the Madison-Leland story in nineteenth-century print and beyond is largely due to these two earliest published accounts, and the respected status of the men who authored them.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century, and opening years of the twentieth century, saw a flourishing of printed versions of the legend. In this later phase of the story's growth, influential Baptist preachers wrote the important printed accounts. Non-Baptists continued to publish versions of the meeting throughout the nineteenth century, but by the 1870s educated Baptist preachers were primarily responsible for promoting the legend in its most dramatic (and, for Leland's personal legacy, flattering) form. The most important question to ask of this later period of the story's development is in what ways accounts authored by Baptists and non-Baptists differed from one another. By the end of the nineteenth century, the legend as told by Baptist preachers from all parts of the nation had achieved remarkable uniformity, even in the often-disputed details.⁶ This uniformity is all the more noteworthy in light of the stark differences between the accounts of Baptists and non-Baptists. Although these differences touched more upon the story's details than its core (it would not be until the start of the twentieth century when some writers began to question the validity of the entire legend itself), by the end of the nineteenth century two distinct versions of the Madison-Leland legend had emerged, one told by Baptist preachers, the other by non-Baptist writers.

Nineteenth-century Baptists gravitated toward Leland as a forefather worthy of admiration and emulation. Renewed interest in the Madison-Leland story among Baptists in the late-nineteenth century was a crucial part of a more general veneration of Leland within the denomina-

tion. For many Baptists, the Madison-Leland story was important to the task of preserving the legacy of the entire Baptist denomination as colonial America's premiere defender of inalienable rights of conscience. Leland attained a revered status among Baptists in America within his own lifetime. His exploits in Virginia and Massachusetts were well known and often recounted. Roger Williams and Isaac Backus long dominated the Baptist pantheon of advocates of liberty of conscience, yet in the minds of many nineteenth-century Baptists, Leland deserved to be counted among this elite group. Understanding Baptist accounts of the Madison-Leland legend requires a broader appreciation of Leland's honored position within the denomination in the nineteenth century.

Histories of the Baptist denomination in Virginia and Massachusetts written in the nineteenth century mentioned Leland frequently with pride and affection. Stephen Wright, in his 1853 history of the Shaftsbury Baptist Association included a biographical vignette on Leland, highlighting his "useful labors to secure equal religious and civil liberty to all denominations," and calling upon his readers to "imitate [Leland's] apostolic zeal" (829, 833). In *Virginia Baptist Ministers* (1860) James B. Taylor, prominent preacher in Richmond, Virginia also spoke of Leland's "vigorous intellect" and indefatigable efforts "promoting the cause of religious liberty" (41). He was, Taylor continued, "a remarkable man ... A quenchless love of liberty, both civil and religious, characterized him. His energy and resolution were equal to any emergency" (40). Henry Weston echoed these sentiments in his 1871 article, "The Life and Times of John Leland," published for the *Baptist Quarterly*.⁷ Leland's "remarkable energy and vigor," his "personal piety ... and eminent evangelical character" all contributed to an "extraordinary popularity and personal influence as a preacher" (Weston 245-46). This popularity was certainly confirmed by the 26 October 1886 story published in *The New York Times* on a group of Baptist pastors meeting in New York who "departed from their usual custom of listening to a profound essay and shook their sides with laughter over amusing anecdotes told of the eccentric John Leland," humorous stories retold with admiration ("Eccentric John Leland").

The four nineteenth-century accounts of the Madison-Leland meeting written by Baptist ministers rested deep within this long-standing adoration of Leland in the Baptist denomination. Nineteenth-century American Baptists passionately guarded their denomination's legacy as a premiere defender of religious liberty in the late eighteenth century. Leland was long recognized as a leader of these efforts. This passion helps explain why a distinctly Baptist version of the Madison-Leland meeting took shape. Bearing this in mind, the four Baptist-authored accounts were William Cathcart's *Baptists and the American Revolution* (1876), Thomas Armitage's *History of the Baptists* (1890), Benjamin Franklin Riley's *History of Baptists in Southern States* (1899), and Charles Fenton James' *Documentary History of the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Virginia* (1900).⁸ All four retold the legend with equal parts dramatic suspense and veneration of Leland, following the model set forth at mid-century by George Briggs. Rather than providing a detailed close reading of these accounts, I will highlight their underlying uniformity by focusing upon their general agreement (with each other, and with Briggs) on three significant aspects of the Madison-Leland story: Leland's candidacy in the Orange County race, the details of his meeting with Madison, and the events that unfolded on Election Day.

All four accounts agreed that Leland was at one time a candidate in the Orange County election. William Cathcart noted Madison's alarm in returning home and finding "Leland a candidate for the county of Orange ... with every prospect of success, for Orange was chiefly a Baptist county" (95). Leland emerged as a leader of the "great dissatisfaction" with the Constitution rising among Baptists in Virginia, wrote Thomas Armitage (quoting Briggs almost verbatim), and eventually decided to stand for election and plead the Baptist cause (804). "Leland was agreed upon as a candidate for the position," B.F. Riley wrote in 1898, following Briggs' earlier suggestion that Leland initially did not vigorously pursue the elected office (105). Charles Fenton James echoed this point two years later, noting that since "the Baptists were not satisfied ... they resolved to oppose ratification" and promptly nominated Leland as a

delegate from Orange county (152). The battle lines were drawn: Leland, the popularly-supported Baptist itinerant, faced Madison, father of the Constitution and Virginia's distinguished native son.

Madison quickly realized that victory depended upon regaining Leland's support, the Baptist accounts continued, and intentionally sought out a meeting just prior to the election. Cathcart and Riley provided much less detail on the meeting itself, opting only to mention, as Riley put it, that Madison visited Leland and "spent some time with him, which resulted in the withdrawal of the latter from the race in favor of the former" (105). They also left unclear whether Leland withdrew at the end of the private meeting or on Election Day. Their important point is simply that Madison's meeting with Leland was a pivotal success in winning the itinerant preacher's support. Armitage and James affirmed this basic point yet also provided a richly detailed account of the meeting. Armitage and James offered virtually no new details on this point, and instead simply quoted Briggs' earlier account at length. Where Cathcart and Riley were ambiguous, Armitage and James were dramatically explicit: the meeting occurred the evening before the election, yet by its end Leland had neither publicly withdrawn his candidacy nor pledged his support to Madison and ratification (Cathcart 95; Riley 105; Armitage 804-5; James 154-58).

The way in which these accounts handled the meeting itself foreshadowed their descriptions of Election Day. Keeping with their earlier brevity, Cathcart and Riley said virtually nothing of the day. Here was the only significant differences among Baptist accounts of the Madison-Leland meeting: Cathcart and Riley left little suspense for Election Day, implying that by that time Madison had already won Leland's support and secured his own election victory. Armitage and James, however, told a slightly different story. For them, as it was for Governor Briggs, Election Day was the climax of the story of the Madison-Leland meeting. In fact, both Armitage and James again quoted almost verbatim from Briggs' letter, affirming that Leland's support of Madison was not made public until a last minute dramatic public conversion (Cathcart 95-96; Riley

105-6; Armitage 804-5; James 155-57). Despite slight variance, all basically agreed that Madison's election victory, and the ratification of the Constitution in Virginia, was largely due to Leland's humble willingness to withdraw his name from consideration and fully support Madison.

Even a cursory reading of these four accounts reveals that the story of the Madison-Leland meeting had coalesced among Baptists into a full-fledged, generally consistent story by the end of the nineteenth century. All four accounts emphasized the importance of Leland's support to ensure Madison's election victory, and, in turn, the ratification of the Constitution in Virginia and the entire nation. Tellingly, none of these accounts, like Barbour's eulogy, placed a second Baptist minister at the meeting, for to do so, presumably, would be to slightly devalue Leland's unique, unparalleled role among Baptists in this pivotal moment of America's history. "Leland's advocacy of Madison's claim to a seat in the Convention," Armitage wrote, "led directly to the adoption of the Constitution by Virginia" (805). Riley agreed: "The ratification of the Federal Constitution by the Virginia Convention was largely due to the exertion and self-sacrifice of a Baptist minister, John Leland" (105). Even James, often more tempered in his conclusions than many Baptist writers, suggested that Leland deserved part of the credit for "the triumph of the new system of government" (155). Catchart, in as bold a statement as offered in any account, declared, "It is unquestionable that Mr. Madison was elected through the efforts and resignation of John Leland, it is all but certain that that act gave our country its famous Constitution" (96).

In what ways, then, did Baptist accounts of the Madison-Leland meeting published in the last quarter of the nineteenth century differ from accounts written by non-Baptists at the same time? From 1875 until the opening years of the twentieth century, non-Baptists authored four significant printed accounts of the story: William Pope Dabney's "President Madison and the Baptist Preacher" published in the August 1881 edition of *Harper's Magazine*; Ellen M. Raynor and Emma L. Petittclerc's *A History of the Town of Cheshire, Berkshire County*, published in 1885; Maria Newton Marshall's 1900 article "An Episode in

Madison's Career" in *The Green Bag*; and Gaillard Hunt's *The Life of James Madison*, published in 1902. Two substantial differences existed between these accounts and those penned by Baptists: the non-Baptist accounts agreed that Leland was not a candidate in the Orange County election, and that he was convinced to publicly support Madison's candidacy by the end of their meeting prior to Election Day. The source of these differences between Baptist and non-Baptist accounts can be reasonably traced to earlier differences between Barbour's eulogy and Briggs' letter. Briggs the Baptist, claiming to record Leland's own recollection, explicitly stated that Leland was a candidate; Barbour remained silent on the issue. Briggs also claimed that Madison won Leland's support not by the end of their meeting, but during a dramatic Election Day debate; again, Barbour somewhat ambiguously implied the opposite, that Madison secured Leland's endorsement by their meeting's end.

Although all of the non-Baptist accounts positively featured Leland – and often praised his noble character and honorable contribution to the ratification of the Constitution – none claimed that Leland directly challenged Madison as a candidate. Dabney noted in passing that Leland, "although not a candidate himself, would control all the votes" of those opposing ratification (447). Raynor and Petitclerc concurred, suggesting that although Leland did not stand for election, those unsure of whether or not to support ratification "will watch Leland, and the vote he casts will be the one that they will cast" (186). Marshall, in her typically melodramatic fashion, noted that Leland was "the man whose hydra-headed influence [Madison] had combated at every turn," yet, again, no mention is made of Leland as an official opposition candidate (340). Hunt, who explicitly recorded all the candidates in Orange County, made no mention of Leland (146).

The non-Baptist accounts also agreed that Madison successfully convinced Leland to support his candidacy by the end of their pre-Election Day meeting. Leland argued "in his characteristic strong manner," Dabney later wrote, yet Madison "pressed his points of argument with that mild and insidious eloquence so peculiarly his own." As it grew

late, Leland, “bold and impetuous as ever,” declared “‘Mr. Madison, I will vote for you.’ ‘Then,’ said Mr. Madison, ‘you will elect me’” (448). Raynor and Peticlerc recalled Leland, “in his home-spun suit,” and Madison, “dressed as courtiers dressed,” debated eagerly “until just as the sun went down,” at which point Leland “sprang to his feet” and declared his support for Madison (187). Marshall, keeping with the dramatic flair of her account, recounted how “many listeners gathered around [Madison and Leland] as the hours slipped by unheeded.” At this end of this impromptu public debate, “the adversary had withdrawn his opposition” (340-41). It was a lengthy and exhaustive debate indeed, Hunt later wrote: “Madison and the parson argued it point by point for some hours, the final outcome being the parson’s conversion and a change of heart on the part of the Baptist voters” (147).

Despite the substantial disagreements between these two sets of accounts, striking similarities remained. Both Baptists and non-Baptists agreed that Madison and Leland did meet at some time prior to the Orange County election. Both suggested that Leland’s eventual support played a crucial role in securing Madison’s election victory. While Baptist authors usually drew more sweeping conclusions about the importance of Leland’s support, non-Baptists also emphasized the far-reaching consequence of the meeting’s outcome. Madison’s election, Dabney noted, “more than anything changed the complexion of the Convention,” a pivotal victory for supporters of ratification (448). Marshall offered an even stronger conclusion: “Upon this event, unremarkable in itself, and almost unknown to history, rests the security of our Nation to-day, – so true it is that from the acorn small the mighty oak doth grow” (341). Leland himself also received glowing admiration. His “logic was inexorable,” Raynor and Peticlerc wrote, “no intellect of the epoch, perhaps, was more powerful.” Though “untutored and uncultivated compared to that of the scholarly ambassador before him,” Leland was steadfast in principle, eloquent and persuasive in argument (187).

Weighing these similarities and difference reveals again the influence of the Barbour and Briggs accounts over the later development of

the Madison-Leland legend in the nineteenth century. Both Baptists and non-Baptists drew heavily from these two early accounts, often quoting them at length verbatim. These non-Baptist authors were less inclined to follow Briggs' account of the story because they, unlike their Baptist counterparts, were not primarily concerned with exalting Leland and his fellow Virginia Baptists' insistence on an explicit guarantee of religious liberty. Moreover, the most glaring disagreements between the two later sets of accounts – over Leland's candidacy and the immediate results of his meeting with Madison – also trace their origins to the ambiguities and discrepancies found in the Barbour and Briggs accounts. This allowed for two distinct versions of the Madison-Leland story to emerge by the end of the nineteenth-century. A Baptist version of the story took shape by century's end, but why? To raise this question is to delve deeper into the significance of the story of the Madison-Leland meeting to American Baptist denominational identity.

In a May 1856 address to the American Baptist Historical Society, Robert Howell, pastor of Main Street Baptist church in Richmond, Virginia, celebrated the history of the early Baptists of Virginia. When his attention turned to Constitutional ratification and the forming of a new American government, Howell trumpeted the legacy of Baptists leaders like John Leland, and the importance of their witness in shaping the direction of the new state and federal governments. "Thus do we see that the Baptists embodied their principles not only in the Constitution of Virginia, but also in the Constitution of the United States. The American government is Baptist," Howell boldly declared. Virginia and federal laws "at last adopted fully, in principle, and in practice, the doctrine of Religious Freedom." These "glorious results" served only to "reflect additional luster upon the frame of The Early Baptists of Virginia" (101).

Howell's address captured the self-congratulatory conclusions Baptists often drew from the story of Leland's meeting with Madison. Baptist leaders appealed to the legend as evidence both of their denomination's unwavering commitment to religious liberty, and, in particular,

Virginia Baptists' crucial role in ensuring the inclusion of such principles in America's federal Constitution. There is certainly no shortage of irony in Howell's address: it celebrated the glorious results of religious freedom while in the same breath declaring, "the American government is Baptist." These statements underscored the tendency among nineteenth-century Baptists to romanticize the Baptist role in the forming and ratifying of the Constitution, and also to reaffirm the denomination's legacy as early America's unsurpassed defender of religious liberty.

The direction of the early growth of the Madison-Leland story must primarily be credited to John Barbour and George Briggs. The credibility lent by these two prominent politicians allowed for a later flourishing of the story in nineteenth-century print. These many accounts, however, did not always speak with one voice; notable differences existed. The most prominent points of disagreement can reasonably be traced to discrepancies between the Barbour and Briggs accounts. Despite a shared debt to Barbour and Briggs, Baptists and non-Baptists who penned accounts of the story still often differed over its important details – like whether or not Leland was a candidate in the race, what immediately resulted following his meeting with Madison, and what eventually transpired on Election Day. These differences are important, for they highlight both the peculiarities of Baptist-authored accounts and, more importantly, the importance of the Madison-Leland story to the Baptist denomination.

The legend of the Madison-Leland meeting occupied a particularly important place in nineteenth-century Baptist life. Stories of this kind have the power to shape a denomination's sense of its identity and purpose, and often also provide the lens through which a people understand their broader national history. The story of the Madison-Leland meeting arose in nineteenth-century print alongside renewed desire among many American Christians, including Baptists, to assert the Christian character and heritage of the nation – to affirm the pivotal influence of the Christian religion and its adherents in crucial moments of America's history, particularly the nation's founding.

Baptist attachment to the Madison-Leland legend often mirrored this trend, yet was more closely connected to fundamental concerns about the denomination's identity and accomplishments in American history. Baptists of all stripes since the early seventeenth century have generally prided themselves on their unwavering commitment to religious liberty for all. Eighteenth-century American Baptists were in the vanguard of pleas for freedom of religion, particularly in colonies like Virginia that retained a well-entrenched established church. With rights of conscience more firmly secured at the start of the nineteenth century, Baptists in America looked back to the accomplishments of leaders like John Leland – and to stories like the meeting between Madison and Leland on the eve of Constitutional ratification – as potent reminders of the denomination's historic commitment to religious liberty, and the importance of this witness in American history.

Apocryphal or not, these stories wield the power to shape a denomination's sense of its identity, purpose, and past. As nineteenth-century Baptist leaders recited the story of Leland's meeting with Madison, they reinforced existing Baptist commitments to religious liberty. Baptist leaders told and retold the Leland-Madison story not only because it was a rewarding exercise in self-congratulation, but also because the story captured a piece of what these storytellers believed to be an important aspect of their denomination's character and heritage.

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Notes

¹ Leland was born in Grafton, Massachusetts in 1754. He lived fourteen years in Virginia, from 1777 to 1791, before returning to Massachusetts where he lived until his death in 1841. The fullest treatment of Leland's life and religious and political thought remains Brad J. Creed, "John Leland, American Prophet of Religious Individualism," Diss. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986.

² For an excellent historiographical survey of the debate as well as a thorough analysis of the relevant evidence concerning the meet-

ing, see Mark Scarberry, "John Leland and James Madison: Religious Influence on the Ratification of the Constitution and on the Proposal of the Bill of Rights," *Penn State Law Review* 113 (2008): 766-78. Accepting the limitations imposed by the scarcity of relevant evidence, Scarberry concludes, "At the very least, it seems probable that Madison met with Leland before the election and persuaded Leland to support Madison's candidacy, which otherwise likely would have failed."

³ These ten accounts likely comprise all of the extended retellings of the meeting published in the nineteenth century.

⁴ For the text of Barbour's eulogy, cited frequently below, see Barbour, "Oration on the Life, Character, and Services of James Madison," *Daily National Intelligencer*, 2 August 1836.

⁵ Barbour's account differed from all other printed versions of the Madison-Leland meeting in placing a second Baptist minister with Leland.

⁶ The Baptists who wrote these accounts were from New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Alabama.

⁷ Weston variously served as pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York, President of Crozer Theological Seminary, and Editor of the *Baptist Quarterly*.

⁸ Cathcart, born in England, was the pastor of Second Baptist Church of Philadelphia, PA. Armitage, also born in England, was the pastor of Fifth Avenue Baptist Church of New York City. Riley was a well-known pastor from Alabama who eventually served as President of Samford University (1888-1893). James, a Virginia native, was the pastor of a church in Culpeper, Virginia before serving as President of Roanoke Female College in Danville, Virginia.

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