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John Waller 1741 - 1802

By Homer Massey

The young man had just recently been converted to Christianity and the experience was so riveting he not only had to tell someone, he was compelled to tell more than one person – he actually began preaching the Gospel himself. Lewis Craig was like a lot of young men in those days, anxious to do something better with his new life as a believer. The trouble was, becoming a preacher wasn't a simple matter because the Virginia colony in 1766 was bound to the Episcopal Church. Craig was a follower of the Baptist order.

This meant that in order to preach he had to be licensed by the state church. In order to receive a license an applicant would have to satisfy a list of things specified by the Episcopalian bishop and enforced by the local parson. Not meeting those requirements did not always stop young Baptists, so they would preach anyway. Craig was one such zealot who apparently was the first to be arrested and charged with preaching without a license in the colony.

A jury of landowners was assembled, and Craig was brought before the court. Virginia considered itself to be very orderly and judicious in addressing these matters and, this being the first time this sort of thing had come up, wanted to be very careful in the handling of it.

Among the jurors was John Waller, better known around town as "Swearin' Jack" because of his colorful language. The case came up in its turn, but the judge apparently dismissed the case after hearing initial testimony. Afterward as the jury was getting ready to leave, Lewis Craig turned and spoke to them: "I thank you, gentlemen of the grand

jury, for the honor you have done me," he began. "While I was wicked and injurious, you took no notice of me, but since I have altered my course of life and endeavored to reform my neighbors, you concern yourselves much about me."[1]

"Swearin' Jack" Waller heard those words and couldn't forget them. One can imagine that when he went home he kept thinking about them – couldn't get them out of his head. Perhaps he knew something of Craig's old life, and how different he was now. Perhaps he thought Craig had something in his life that Waller wanted in his. Whatever the reason John Waller began attending the meetings of the Baptists in town and listening to the preachers himself. Eventually he was converted, baptized, and soon began preaching the Gospel himself.

Waller, after whom "Waller's Church" in Spotsylvania County is named, soon became notable in the annals of Baptist history for being one of the first Baptist preachers arrested and convicted of the charge of preaching without a license, as well as the Baptist preacher most often jailed for this crime. There were at least forty-four imprisoned Baptist preachers over a ten-year period before Thomas Jefferson wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1779 and James Madison had it adopted in 1786. Subsequently Madison's amendments to the new Federal Constitution known as the Bill of Rights all but guaranteed these freedoms.

During those ten years, however, many instances of harassment of Baptist preachers were recorded. In Waller's own early ministry one incident was typical:

> Once while John Waller was conducting an open-air service in Caroline County the local magistrate, along with the parson of the Episcopal church, kept disturbing the proceedings by punching at Waller with the butt end of a horsewhip. When Mr. Waller began to pray they jerked him off the stage, beat his

[1] Robert B. Semple, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, revised and extended by George W. Beale (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications, 1810, revision in 1894), 495.

> head upon the ground, and carried him down a lane where he was given some twenty lashes with the horsewhip. After a tongue-lashing by the parson, Waller returned bleeding but singing praises to God, mounted the stage and preached with a great deal of liberty.[2]

At a memorial service in 1931 a large tablet on Waller's Baptist Churchwas unveiled describing John Waller's contributions to the cause of religious liberty in Virginia. R. E. Harkness in the principal address said, "John Waller, especially, was one of that heroic number who a century or more ago fought the great battles of religious liberty, freedom of conscience and separation of Church and State and paid the Baptist price of that freedom which we enjoy today."[3]

William Cathcart wrote this summation of John Waller's ministry: "He preached thirty-five years, baptized more than two thousand persons, assisted in ordaining twenty-seven ministers and in constituting twenty churches, and lay one hundred and thirteen days in four different jails, and he was repeatedly scourged in Virginia. He now rests from his labors, and his works followed him."[4]

After a lengthy ministry in Virginia, Waller moved to Greenwood, SC where he died July 4, 1802.

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[2] William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 1166.

[3] Lewis P. Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg VA: J. P. Bell and Co., 1938), 416.

[4] Ibid., 346.