Title: The Separates and the Separation of Church and State

Program of Study: Master of Arts in History (non-thesis)

Presentation Type: Print Poster

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Category: Textual

Abstract:

This documentary focuses on the role played by Separate Baptist preachers from the area of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia in the making of American religious freedom. In colonial Virginia, the Church of England was in control as the official religion of the colony. Questioning the Anglican Church or refusal to attend its services meant certain prosecution. However, this did not stop some daring Baptist preachers from presenting an alternative. The documentary spends time focusing on James Ireland, Elijah Craig, Samuel Harris, and John Leland, and the roles each played in the development of the Baptist faith in Virginia as well as the role these men played in making religious freedom part of the First Amendment to the Constitution. It runs for approximately twenty minutes and gathers information from various interviews, including Professor Samuel Smith of the History Department, local historians of Baptist Churches in Somerset and Berryville, VA, among others. It also includes visual footage from one of three possible places where James Ireland and Elijah Craig were imprisoned during the late colonial period and preached a revival from within their cells. If it were not for these Baptist ministers, among others, religious freedom may not exist in the fashion that it does today.

Christian Worldview Integration:

As a Christian, I wished to not only cover periods of church history, but also to present the truth in as unbiased a fashion as possible. I have learned both to speak the truth, but also to speak it in love in accordance with Ephesians 5. So, while I seek to present an unbiased
viewpoint, I also seek to understand where the other side is coming from when solving a particular issue, particularly in history. This documentary will be useful to the culture at large because it will give people names to associate with the First Amendment guarantee of religious freedom. Many are well aware of James Madison’s role in the development of the First Amendment freedoms, but not many consider what and who influenced him to take some of the positions that he did. While PBS released a documentary on early American history that showed the Baptists as a persecuted minority in Virginia, and even showed how they influenced men like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, it did not give specific names of influential Baptist ministers to associate with these stories. Elijah Craig and John Leland in particular both lived in Orange County near James Madison. Like Madison, Craig himself was from Orange County. I seek to fill the gaps of the previous research and present an honest portrayal of four preachers in particular who had the courage to stand up for what they believed. In addition, it will show the religious side of how the Baptist faith gained a footing in America and rose from persecuted minority to an increasingly accepted denomination among Americans.