

*Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century*, by Jewel L. Spangler. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008.

Jewel L. Spangler's new book provides the best account to date of the emergence of this seemingly dissident group. Virginia Baptists, she argues, succeeded not so much because they challenged the establishment as because they did not challenge it in the ways that mattered most and because they initially established themselves in areas poorly served by the Church of England. The imperial crisis and the emergence of republican government fostered their growth, as did the Baptists' own adaptations to the new religious and political environment.

Although Virginia's Anglicans were strong and growing in the mid-eighteenth century, their limitations offered openings to dissenting groups. In the Tidewater, ministers were increasing in quality and numbers and were likely to be native Virginians who were comfortable in and felt a commitment to their communities. In more remote areas, however, larger parishes and less frequent services prevailed. Many ministers were uncommitted and corrupt; many were Scottish and thus separated ethnically from their parishioners. Throughout the colony the church probably enjoyed the loyalty of a portion of the population comparable to English parishes. It was less successful, however, in reaching young people, slaves, and less educated whites.

The Presbyterians and later the Baptists made their earliest inroads in areas that lacked Anglican ministers or had ministers of poor quality or who provoked internal friction among their parishioners. As Baptists expanded beyond these initial enclaves, they encountered more resistance and persecution. The crisis of legitimacy for the gentry and the Anglican establishment that grew from the Two Penny controversy, the push to create an American bishopric, and the Robinson scandal facilitated Baptist expansion into the Tidewater. The dissenters' emphasis upon the conversion experience, open emotional displays in worship, and stricter regulation of conduct drew many people who were discontent with Anglican customs. But they did not challenge the institutions of slavery and patriarchal authority that were central to Virginia life.

Across Virginia Baptist churches drew their membership from all levels of society rather than disproportionately from the impoverished or the marginal. Most were small farmers, but wealthy men were also present. What variations in membership profiles occurred from county to county largely reflected differing patterns of regional economic development. Many Baptists participated actively in civic affairs, serving as road overseers, grand jurymen, militia officers, justices of the peace, and even sheriffs. Although they may have been more rigorous in their efforts, Baptist churches enforced many of the same behavioral norms as their Anglican counterparts.

Whatever their congruences with Virginia's established order, however, Baptists did depart from it in ways that alarmed others around them. The conversion experience brought a personal transformation that severed or strained converts' existing ties to others around them. Baptist congregations created autonomous communities whose members formed much more egalitarian relationships among themselves than prevailed in the world outside, and they examined and judged one another's sins with a rigor that offended conventional notions of personal privacy and autonomy.

The Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary years brought the Baptists into far greater prominence. Ironically the social and political changes of the period moved mainstream Virginia closer to Baptist values and practices. The extralegal actions and organizations of patriots made unlicensed Baptist preachers and unsanctioned religious gatherings less offensive, and the increased concern with excesses of greed and materialism as the imperial crisis continued made Baptist rigor in condemning immorality seem less strange. Revolutionary America's republican ethos made their egalitarian spirit and emphasis on congregational authority less exceptionable. Moreover, the need for public support in wartime and in a republican polity enabled Virginia Baptists to push for greater tolerance and ultimately full religious liberty, especially as the Revolution undermined the Church of England's legal position.

Baptists themselves were changing as well. At least one change was unplanned: with the growth of the Baptists in many communities, new converts were more likely to know a significant number before joining a church. Thus conversions led to less complete disruptions of existing ties between these individuals and the world around them. In other ways Baptists consciously adapted to the new environment. Their public statements emphasized their support for the patriot cause and drew parallels between the struggle for independence and their own efforts to gain religious freedom. During the post-war years, Baptists worked toward greater denominational unity and doctrinal uniformity because they needed to compete in the more open religious marketplace.

I have learned an enormous amount from this book, from Spangler's earlier articles, and from her extremely helpful critique of the evangelical chapter of my recent book on Virginia's Northern Neck. My differences with Spangler arise largely from this regional perspective. I wish that she had paid more attention to Virginia's Tidewater. Northern Neck Baptists differed significantly from those Spangler portrays. Church members were much more predominantly poor and were more vocal critics of gentry culture. Yet they also moved further toward acceptance of that culture. Baptists celebrated the preacher Lewis Lunsford not only for his piety but also for his success at the competitive verbal dexterity prized by the gentry. Northern Neck Baptists borrowed from prevailing patterns of Virginia law and government in fashioning their own institutional structures, even experimenting with traditional forms of compulsory financial support. Despite their egalitarian ideals, at least occasionally they employed the language and values of deference among themselves.

If, as others suggest, the Piedmont and Southside possessed more dynamic economies than the Tidewater by mid-century, I would have liked to learn more of Spangler's Baptists' feeling about and interactions with commerce and cosmopolitan connections. In view of her important earlier work on African Americans Baptists, I was surprised they did not receive more attention here.

None of this suggests that Spangler's analysis, centered on the Southside and Piedmont, is wrong on its own terms. My portrayal of Baptists on the Tidewater Northern Neck differs from Catherine Obrion's for King and Queen County some ten to twenty miles to the south. Spangler notes significant differences among the counties she analyzes. What this does suggest is that even as we become more aware of the "Atlantic world," historians of the backcountry, the Chesapeake, and other parts of early America should pay closer attention to local variations between small portions of those regions and to the differing connections of those places with more distant portions of the planet.

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In sum, Spangler has tremendously increased our knowledge of evangelical Protestantism's role in backcountry and Chesapeake life. That further questions remain unanswered is in the nature of successes like hers.

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