

Early Virginians and Religious Taxation

Compiled By
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[Patrick Henry](#)

Stipple engraving by Leney, after
Thomas Sully

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In 1779 the Virginia Assembly deprived Church of England ministers of tax support.

Patrick Henry's response to the 1779 Virginia Assembly's denial of tax support to the Church of England was a bill for general religious assessment in 1784.

Henry's bill was close to passage when the Assembly elected him governor of Virginia, which ended his ability to promote passage of bills.

The tactic succeeded in preventing passage of the general religious assessment bill.

An Appeal for Tax-Supported Religion

- The debate in Virginia in 1785 over religious taxation produced an unprecedented outpouring of petitions to the General Assembly.
- A petition from supporters of Patrick Henry's bill in Surry County declares that "the Christian Religion is conducive to the happiness of Societies."
- They assert that:
 - "True Religion is most friendly to social and political Happiness-- That a conscientious Regard to the approbation of Almighty God lays the most effectual restraint on the vicious passions of Mankind affords the most powerful incentive to the faithful discharge of every social Duty and is consequently the most solid Basis of private and public Virtue is a truth which has in some measure been acknowledged at every Period of Time and in every Corner of the Globe."

A Proposal for Tax-Supported Religion for Virginia

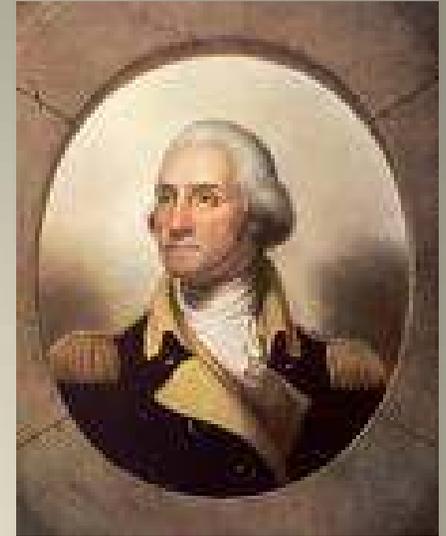
- **Patrick Henry's** general assessment bill was similar to those passed in the New England states.
- In 1785, a considerable opposition had been developed to Henry's bill.
- The bill levied a tax for the support of religion but permitted individuals to earmark their taxes for the church of their choice.
- The bill met with stiff opposition led by several prominent members of the Virginia General Assembly, and a decision was made to postpone consideration of the bill until the fall 1785 session of the legislature.
- Postponing the bill allowed opponents to mobilize and defeat it.
- Leading the forces for postponement was **James Madison**.
- Voting against postponement and, therefore, in support of a general tax for religion was the future Chief Justice of the United States,
• **John Marshall**.

George Washington in Support of Tax-Supported Religion

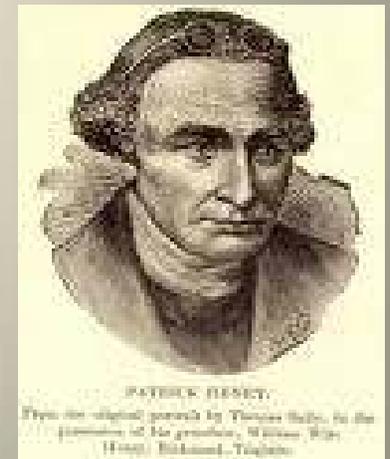


George Mason

In a letter George Washington informs his friend and neighbor, George Mason, in the midst of the public agitation over Patrick Henry's general assessment bill, that he does not, in principle, oppose "making people pay towards the support of that which they profess," although he considers it "impolitic" to pass a measure that will disturb public tranquility.



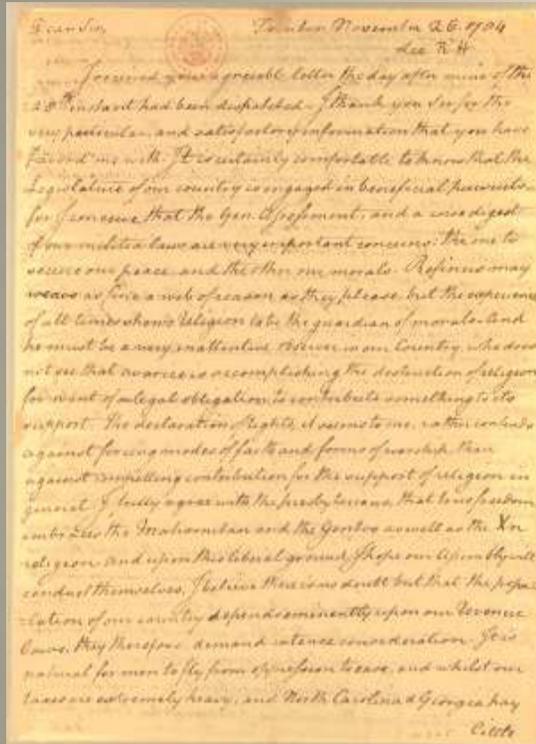
George Washington



Patrick Henry

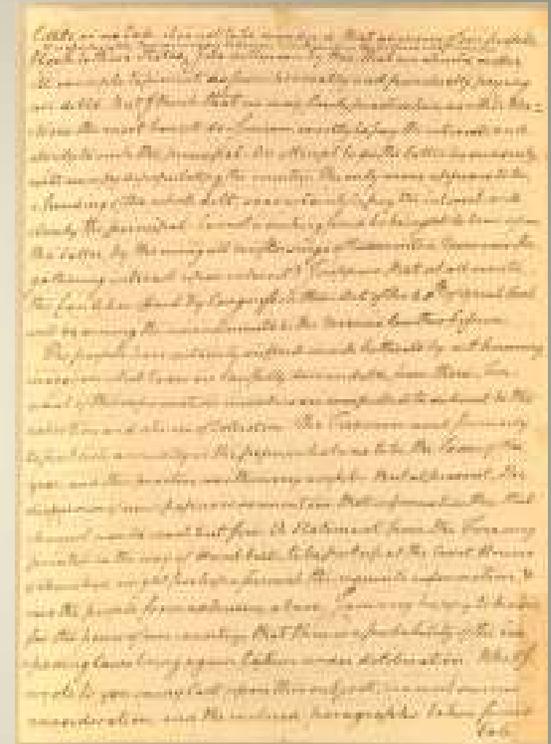
Another Supporter of Tax-Supported Religion

Richard Henry Lee supported Patrick Henry's bill because he believed that the influence of religion was the surest means of creating the virtuous citizens needed to make a republican government work. His remark that "refiners may weave as fine a web of reason as they please, but the experience of all times shows religion to be the guardian of morals" appears to be aimed at **Thomas Jefferson** who, at this point in his career, was thought by other Virginians to believe that sufficient republican morality could be instilled in the citizenry by instructing it solely in history and the classics.



Received your agreeable letter the day after mine of the 20th inst. it had been dispatched. Thank you for the very particular and satisfactory information that you have furnished me with. It is certainly comfortable to know that the Legislature of our country is engaged in beneficial pursuits for I am sure that the Gen. Assembly, and a well regulated of our militia laws are very important concerns. The one to secure our peace and the other our morals. Refiners may weave as fine a web of reason as they please, but the experience of all times shows religion to be the guardian of morals and he must be a very small minded observer in our country who does not see that success is accomplishing the destruction of religion for want of a legal obligation to contribute something to its support. The declaration of rights it seems to me, rather combats against forcing modes of faith and forms of worship than against withholding contribution for the support of religion in general. I fully agree with the presbyterians that true freedom extends to the Mahometan and the Jew as well as the Xⁿ religion and upon this liberal ground I hope our Assembly will conduct themselves. I believe there is no doubt but that the propagation of our country depends eminently upon our religious laws. They therefore demand intense consideration. It is natural for men to fly from oppression to ease, and whilst our taxes are so extremely heavy, and North Carolina & Georgia lay

Lee R H



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[James Madison](#)

Miniature portrait by Charles Willson Peale, 1783

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James Madison, the leading opponent of government-supported religion, combined both arguments (tax support for churches; separation of government and church) in his celebrated Memorial and Remonstrance.

Madison's principal written contribution to the contest over Henry's general assessment bill was his Memorial and Remonstrance.

Madison's petition has grown in stature over time and is now regarded as one of the most significant American statements on the issue of the relationship of government to religion.

Madison grounded his objection to Henry's bill on the civil libertarian argument that it violated the citizen's "unalienable" natural right to freedom of religion and on the practical argument that government's embrace of religion had inevitably harmed it. Thus, he combined and integrated the two principal arguments used by opponents of Henry's bill

In the fall of 1785, Madison marshaled sufficient legislative support to administer a decisive defeat to the effort to levy religious taxes.

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