

Thomas Jefferson's Church: Religious Services in the U.S. Capitol Building

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One of the most notable and controversial of Thomas Jefferson's writings on the subject of politics and religion is his January 1, 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. The Danbury Baptists, concerned about their religious liberty as a minority group in Connecticut, asked the new president to clarify his view. In response Jefferson wrote:

Religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship. I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"; thus building a wall of separation between church and state. (qtd in Harris and Kidd 152)¹

This paradigm-creating phrase, "wall of separation between church and state," has been the touchstone for discussions of religious freedom, especially over the past century.

What is striking about this letter is not only the content, but also the timing: New Year's Day 1802 was a Friday. Two days later, Jefferson attended a religious service in the then-current Hall of Representatives in the Capitol Building. To understand Jefferson's motivation, one must consider the role of cheese: a group of Baptists in Cheshire, Massachusetts, were particularly fond of Jefferson and wanted to show their appreciation to him in a big way. They milked 900 cows and used their product to create a 1,234-pound block of "mammoth cheese"—four feet in diameter and eighteen inches tall. Inscribed on the red crust may have been a Jeffersonian motto, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God" (see Dreisbach [10], who notes that the quote cannot be verified). The cheese was delivered to

Jefferson on New Year's Day by two members of the town, one of whom was John Leland, the town's Baptist divine. Jefferson invited him to be the speaker at the Capitol religious service on Sunday.²

This event provides a humorous entrance into the connection between politics and religion at the nation's founding. Apprehending Jefferson's views on religion and politics is both confusing and important, for Jefferson more than any other founder shaped the language of church-state separation.³ He was the author of Virginia's 1777 Act of Establishing Religious Freedom, which influenced the language used in the religious clauses to the Bill of Rights. Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists is widely cited by groups and individuals dedicated to the separation of church and state. In fact, the Supreme Court has used the phrase as evidence several times in both majority and minority opinions on religiopolitical issues.⁴

The juxtaposition of Jefferson's carefully worded influential letter to the Danbury Baptists and his presence at a religious service in the Capitol Building is striking. An outside observer could hastily conclude that Jefferson's words and actions were not consistent during this first weekend of 1802. But the events of this weekend, and the hundreds of other religious services in the Capitol Building as well as other government buildings in the city of Washington, point to something else: Jefferson and others recognized the benefits of developing a national identity that transcended interdenominational division.⁵

This essay will narrate particular occurrences in which the Capitol Building in Washington, DC was used for religious services and consider the rationale behind such events. I argue that these events show that policies of religious liberty in the Constitution represented a response to a history of religious oppression and dissension in Europe, as well as an attempt to find unity amidst the colonies' diverse religious perspectives. While a sense of the religiosity (and the cultural and political power of an assumed pan-Protestant identity) of the nation can be ascertained from these events, the services speak more to a civil religion that was a foundational part of the country's emerging national identity. The

civil religion manifest in the frequency and variety of religious services at the Capitol reinforced the republican ideal of government by broadcasting respect for different opinions and by educating attendees in the variety of theological views espoused by American citizens. These services provided a forum celebrating American religious freedom as a contribution to good government.

Religious Activities in Government Buildings

Little has been written about religious activity in the Capitol or other government buildings. One work that does include a brief discussion of the topic is James H. Hutson's *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, a companion book to the 1996 exhibition of the same name at the Library of Congress. Besides Hutson's useful work, further primary sources such as diaries, personal correspondence, and newspaper advertisements provide records of religious services that occurred in the Capitol Building. Compiling these sources provides a picture of varied comprehensiveness with regard to the nature and substance of the services.

The Revolutionary era is a period of transition vis-à-vis religious liberty in the United States. The untried confederacy was seeking an identity that would include all thirteen colonies and the varied denominations of Christianity they espoused. Just a few decades before, many colonies had their preferred denomination at the expense of others, though the situation was evolving, as historian Wilhelmus Bryan notes:

“The rigors of religious intolerance and persecution as expressed in the laws [of the colonies] were severe and complete. But it is a pleasant reflection . . . that for some years prior to the revolution, while the laws remained unchanged, their enforcement gradually became less vigorous, owing in part to the common danger felt in communities close to the frontier . . . and the need of united action with the mother country.” (*History* 1:80)

The final decades of the eighteenth century saw the repeal of laws restricting the practice of Catholicism, and the use of taxes to support clergy of a preferred denomination waned. Still, an

underlying tension concerning the direction of the country remained and demonstrated two realities of the time, as Harry Stout describes: “one [reality was] political and constitutional, which explicitly separated church and state and left God out of the formulation; and the other [was] rhetorical and religious, in which ‘America’ inherited New England’s colonial covenant and where God orchestrated a sacred union of church and state for his redemptive purposes” (63). Tension like this could cause violent division and could jeopardize any notions of a national unity.

Conceptions of nationalism were also inconsistent in the nascent republic. Certainly desires for a stronger national government were opposed by groups more interested in maintaining power at the state level. Beyond this, Benjamin Park’s recent work illustrates that allegiance to a federal body was a divisive issue that developed at different rates throughout the nation. He writes, “nationalism was never a set of static, self-dependent principles that were agreed upon by a majority of citizens. Rather, conceptions of national identity—and even the ‘nation’ itself—varied dramatically during the early republic period, and a homogenized understanding distorts a dynamic and diverse reality” (6). The new federal government was faced with a problem: in light of religious and political differences, how could the United States develop a coherent and compelling national identity?

Contained within the Constitution was the plan to establish a seat of the federal government that would be separate from the states. The debate over where the land would be located is a story in itself (see, for example, Yazawa and also Bowling, “A Capital”), but under George Washington’s leadership, and in response to the 1790 Residence Act, a plot of land ten miles square on the Potomac River was designated as the capital district. The land came from both Maryland and Virginia and encompassed the settlements of Georgetown and Alexandria, but was primarily an open wilderness ready to become a new city for the federal government.

The construction began during the final decade of the eighteenth century with the building of roads, houses, the first stages of the

Capitol Building (see Bowling, “The Year” and also Allen), and the seemingly proactive construction of a Presbyterian church:

. . . the summer of 1794 places the Presbyterian Church in the front rank in the pioneer religious work started in the new city. At that time a population had just begun to gather, for only the year before the cornerstones of the Capitol and the White House had been laid and the lines of only a few of the streets had been cut through the forests, while the erection of houses had scarcely been started. A year later the population of the city was estimated to be only 500, so that it will be perceived that the promoters of church work, as well as those identified with the material development drew largely upon the hopes of the future of what was to be the capital city of the American Republic. (Bryan, *Beginnings* 52)

Though a Presbyterian church was out of place in its Episcopal environs, the erection of that church was not wholly surprising considering the influence of the denomination in New England. Such influence was expanding: John Witherspoon, then president of Princeton University, assisted in the writing of the Constitutions for both the United States and the Presbyterian church. References to the Presbyterian church in Washington are absent until 1800. However, another early church building was referenced in a November 16, 1800 letter from early Washington settler Margaret Bayard Smith, the wife of a newspaper publisher: “At this time the only place for public worship in our new-city was a small, a very small frame building at the bottom of Capitol Hill. It had been a tobacco house belonging to Daniel Carrol and was purchased by a few Episcopalians for a mere trifle and fitted up as a church in the plainest and rudest manner.” She also notes that no more than fifty or sixty people could fit in the building and that the service usually had about twenty (see Smith and Hunt 13; see also Robertson). Evidently the plans for the new city were attracting religious houses of worship. This development seems more pragmatic than planned, as leaders who desired the new capital to be a cultural as well as political capital discussed “a library, a botanic garden, museums to enhance knowledge and fan the flames of American patriotism,

an archives to preserve the nation's documentary history, scientific societies, and an experimental agricultural station," but not a church (see Bowling, "A Capital" 49–50).

Specific Services

Amidst the establishment of churches and the construction of the city came a newspaper mention of a religious service occurring in the partially completed Capitol Building:

CITY of WASHINGTON, June 19 [1795]. It is with much pleasure that we discover the rising consequence of our infant city. Public worship is now regularly administered at the capitol, every Sunday morning, at 12 o'clock by the reverend Mr. Ralph, and an additional school has been opened by that gentleman, upon an extensive and liberal plan. ("Domestic Intelligence")

While the unfinished Capitol Building may have filled an immediate need for a physical space, the presence of Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in the area would have met at least some of the need for religious services. So, were services in the Capitol Building meeting necessary? Ida A. Brudnick argues yes: in a report for the Congressional Research Service, she writes, "When Congress moved to Washington in 1800, houses of worship were so few that the chaplains took turns conducting Sunday services in the House chamber—now Statuary Hall" (1). John Quincy Adams, at this point a senator, agreed with this sentiment three years later: "There is no church of any denomination in the city" (see Adams and Adams 1:268). Adams's incorrect statement can be attributed to his arrival in Washington only two days before. Churches did exist, but as a whole Washington was little more than a construction site. Fredrika J. Teute notes, "Early on, the functions of the city were so purely political that a private side to life hardly seemed to have existed. Boarding houses accommodated members of the government's three branches and served as informal caucuses for politicking. Domesticity resided back in the home districts where wives and children had been left behind" (90; see also Young).

What were apparently unofficial services became, during the turn of the century, sanctioned gatherings. The Annals of Congress on December 4, 1800 contain a short note on the subject: “The Speaker informed the House that the Chaplains had proposed, if agreeable to the House, to hold Divine service every Sunday in their chamber” (10 *AOC* 797). No further debate is recorded, and the issue is not raised in the proceedings of the Senate. The House spent more time that day debating the need for and location of stenographers to record the debates in the House. In addition to being used for regular services on Sundays, the Capitol also hosted services on holidays like the 4th of July. An June 18, 1801 letter from David Austin to Thomas Jefferson states, “a discourse should be delivered in the Capitol, to any disposed to attend.” That Austin would make the request to the President deserves consideration. One might assume that the chaplains would oversee such services (in addition to the Sunday services) as well. The records of the National Archives list thirteen letters sent to Jefferson by Austin before this request; his first letter indicates no earlier acquaintance between the two, so there is no special relationship here. Why would Austin make this request directly to the President? Whatever the reason, Austin received an affirmative reply and delivered a sermon based on Psalms 22:28: “For the kingdom is the Lord’s: and he is the Governor among the nations.”

The rush to move Congress to Washington in 1800 did not ultimately help John Adams’s bid for reelection, and Thomas Jefferson came to power as the new President. In the early years of his presidency, Jefferson wrote the letter of response to the Danbury Baptist Association, and two days later he attended a U.S. Capitol church service. As a matter of fact, Jefferson made a habit of attending Sunday church services while in Washington both as Vice President and President (see Hutson, *Religion* 84.) He did so first at the tobacco house turned Episcopal Church, although, as already noted, he had few options. As a contemporary of Jefferson wrote, “He could have had no motive for this regular attendance, but that of respect for public worship, choice of place or preacher he had not, as this, with the exception of a little Catholic chapel was the

only church in the new city” (see Smith and Hunt 13). During his presidency Jefferson regularly attended services in the U.S. Capitol Building, even sitting in the same seat each week. Smith records as much in her letters: “The custom of preaching in the Hall of Representatives had not then been attempted, though after it was established Mr. Jefferson during his whole administration, was a most regular attendant. The seat he chose the first Sabbath, and the adjoining one, which his private secretary occupied, were ever afterwards by the courtesy of the congregation, left for him and his secretary” (Smith and Hunt 13).

One might argue that, for Jefferson, this was the “most conspicuous form of public witness possible, regularly attending worship services where the delegates of the entire nation could see him—in the ‘hall’ of the House of Representatives” (Hutson, *Religion* 83). This public view assisted him politically, for it silenced critics who were less than kind about Jefferson’s perceived lack of faith. Although the Congregational minister and Jefferson opponent William Cutler thought Congress was “insulted by the introduction of Leland, the cheesemonger, as a preacher” in the January 1802 service, he also recognized the political value of such a move. He wrote later regarding Jefferson’s attendance at the services, “Although this is no kind of evidence of any regard to religion, it goes far to prove that the idea of bearing down and overturning our religious institutions, which, I believe, has been a favorite object, is now given up. The political necessity of paying some respect to the religion of the country is felt” (Cutler, Cutler, and Egle, *Life*, 58–59, 119).

The ecumenical nature of the services shed some light on why Jefferson felt comfortable participating. As Hutson argues, “The nondiscriminatory manner in which the nation’s various Christian denominations were permitted to conduct congressional church services seems to have shielded them from controversy and made them politically safe for Jefferson to attend” (*Religion* 86). Jefferson celebrated the diversity of people who were, as he said in his first inaugural speech, “enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating

honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man” (*U. S. Presidential* 30). Certainly people noticed Jefferson and treated him with great respect. Catharine Mitchill, the wife of a Senator from New York, once noted in a letter her social faux pas of stepping on Jefferson’s foot after a service. In her words, she was “so prodigiously frighten’d that I could not stop to make an apology, but got out of the way as quick as I could.” In a celebration of Republican freedom, Mitchill goes on to note, “Now I suppose if this had been King George or the Emperor of France I should have had my Head cut off for the insult. But thank heaven we Fredonians [an informal term for colonists after the Revolution] have no such tyrants to reign over us” (qtd in Sung 175).

But the argument can be taken further, as it is elsewhere (again by Hutson): “While it is certainly true that Jefferson did not, like James I, publicly exult in his role as a nursing father of the church, an argument can be made that, within the space left by his principled aversion to the use of state power to promote religion, he played the part” (*Forgotten* 63). In addition to attending the services in the Capitol Building, Jefferson assisted young churches in the city of Washington by allowing services in multiple government buildings and provided money for the building of churches in the area.

Jefferson’s successor, James Madison, attended religious services in the Capitol as frequently as Jefferson. Madison “evidently thought that the Constitution conferred some modest degree of authority that would permit the national government to support Christianity in a non-discriminatory, non-coercive way” (Hutson, *Religion* 78). A Christian service that was broadly Protestant would surely belong in this category of authority. It is unclear if James Monroe followed his predecessor’s example. A British traveler recorded in an 1823 periodical his attendance at a service in the House of Representatives, and after he had a meal, he “sat in the seat next to the President’s in the Episcopal Church, where we had an excellent sequel to our morning’s sermon” (“Remarks”). Monroe could have been in both services, but he could also have been absent from both, his designated place left empty.

John Quincy Adams is a useful source for this subject because of his detailed memoirs as well as his long tenure in Washington, starting as a Senator in 1803, then Secretary of State and President, and finally a Representative until his death in 1848. His first Sunday was spent at the Capitol, as noted earlier, and he attended services there off and on throughout his tenure in the capital city. This is not to say that doing so was always enjoyable. For example, his memoirs record Adams's attendance at the Capitol for two weeks in May 1842 when a Mr. Maffitt was preaching. The first week's sermon, when Mr. Maffitt took Luke 15 as his text, was viewed by Adams as a "stab, Joab-like, under the fifth rib" directed at him by a preacher whose sermon was "certainly given in no Christian spirit." Adams judged the public speaking ability of the preacher as well, believing his oratory to be "superficial, flashy, and shallow, but very attractive" (Adams and Adams 11:160). The following week, when the subject was the resurrection, Adams viewed the topic as "too capacious for the grasp and too weighty for the poise of Mr. Maffitt" (Adams and Adams 11:164). Another sermon by an unnamed preacher was called "galimatias" (i.e., confused talk or gibberish; Adams and Adams 11:196). Responses like these are scattered throughout Adams's memoirs.

The Nature of the Religious Services

Describing the general nature of a religious service over the course of almost seventy years, with limited and piecemeal information, is an imposing task. The general structure for the religious services is clear: the chaplains of each house organized the services and would preach on alternate weeks. Occasionally visiting clergy were invited to preach as well; as Smith notes, "those of distinguished reputation attracted crowded audiences and were evidently gratified by having such an opportunity for the exercise of their talents and their zeal" (Smith and Hunt 15).

If there is a common trait for these services, it would be a lack of general organization. The role of chaplain began as a part-time task taken on by members of the clergy with responsibilities elsewhere. The work of the chaplain included preaching in these services,

though Jefferson invited Leland to speak and other guest preachers, approved by the Speaker of the House, participated as well. The meeting place changed depending on the week—early locations in the Capitol included such locations as the north wing; “the Oven,” a temporary meeting place for the House of Representatives that was removed in 1804; the Supreme Court chamber in the basement; and what is now known as Statuary Hall. An entry in Adams’s memoirs records him one Sunday going from room to room until he found the actual gathering—apparently the meeting place was not always known.

The services made full use of the room the congregants were meeting in, regardless of the actual room. When meeting in the House Chambers, the rostrum of the Speaker of the House was utilized as the pulpit. The nature of the religious services in the Capitol is telling: their function was much more than simply religious observance. According to one of the attendees of the early services, Washington resident Margaret Smith, at times the events did not look like religious services, but more like social gatherings. She writes,

I have called these Sunday assemblies in the capitol, a congregation, but the almost exclusive appropriation of that word to religious assemblies, prevents its being a descriptive term as applied in the present case, since the gay company who thronged the H.R. looked very little like a religious assembly. The occasion presented for display was not only a novel, but a favourable one for the youth, beauty and fashion of the city, Georgetown and environs (Smith and Hunt 13–14).

Not only were these services fashionable—they were popular as well, as the chairs would be packed into the room and completely occupied, even on the platform behind the Speaker’s chair. According to Smith, “This sabbath-day-resort became so fashionable, that the floor of the house offered insufficient space, the platform behind the Speaker’s chair, and every spot where a chair could be wedged in was crowded with ladies in their gayest costume and their attendant

beaux and who led them to their seats with the game gallantry as is exhibited in a ball room” (Smith and Hunt 14).

The music added to the festive atmosphere, the opposite of a typical worship service for the time,⁶ as the United States Marine Corps Band accompanied the singing, at least for a while. Smith describes the music as “little in union with devotional feelings, as the place. The marine band, were the performers. Their scarlet uniform, their various instruments, made quite a dazzling appearance in the gallery.” In her mind, “The marches they played were good and inspiring, but in their attempts to accompany the psalm-singing of the congregation, they completely failed and after a while, the practice was discontinued,—it was too ridiculous” (Smith and Hunt 14). A service in February 1841 was staid, as John Quincy Adams notes in his memoir—“There was a small choir of singers in the front galleries, who sung the hymns” (Adams and Adams 10:435).

The religious services were progressive for both their ecumenism and their allowance of female preachers. Smith notes, “Even women were allowed to display their pulpit eloquence, in this national Hall. . . . The admission of female preachers has been justly reprobated: curiosity rather than piety attracted throngs on such occasions” (Smith and Hunt 15). The first woman known to preach at the Capitol was Dorothy Ripley, a British Methodist missionary, on January 12, 1806. The first time a woman preached in the Capitol was likely the first time a woman was allowed to speak at a formal gathering in the Capitol at all. When granted permission to preach by the Speaker of the House, Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina, Ripley asked “the Lord [to] direct my tongue, and open my mouth powerfully, that His Name (by a woman) may be extolled to the great astonishment of the hearers, who no doubt will be watching every word to criticize thereon” (240). Twenty-one years later Ripley was followed by another female preacher, Harriet Livermore, who also spoke in 1832, 1838, and 1843. While Ripley was an outsider, Livermore was the daughter and granddaughter of former Congressmen. It is said that her first engagement drew a packed crowd, so much so that John Quincy Adams “sat on the steps leading up to her feet because he could not find a free chair”

(Hutson, *Religion* 87). Another witness of the event noted that the Avenue leading into the building “was full of persons excluded.” Livermore’s text was 2 Samuel 23:3–4—“He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds, as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain.” The observer’s account notes that the message “was intended principally for the rulers of the nation,” though she considered as well “the whole multitude—the rulers of schools—the rulers of families: and as individuals, the rulers of our passions.” Her sermon was eloquent and well received, drawing “the profound attention and sympathy of the audience” (“Miss Livermore”).

Conclusion: Thomas Jefferson and his Wall of Separation

What does the fact that Thomas Jefferson attended religious services at the U.S. Capitol Building reveal about his personal beliefs? Very little. Correlating attendance at religious events with theological views is fraught with methodological difficulties. For one, many factors played into Jefferson’s decision to attend. Jefferson’s motivation to be present at these services could have been an adherence to what would have been culturally normative for the time. Political motivations must be considered as well. In view of political adversaries who called him an atheist, Jefferson’s attendance at (very public) religious services provided a clear retort to their accusations. Even without considering these factors, attending a religious service does not mean agreement with the beliefs of the speaker, especially with a varied lineup of guest preachers. What Jefferson personally believed is unclear.

A more instructive direction considers how Jefferson’s attendance at these services sheds light on his views vis-à-vis the relationship between church and state. Jefferson remains one of the most prominent voices regarding the development of religious freedom in Virginia as well as in the newly formed government. His writings on the matter, be it in the legal record or private correspondence, have been quoted in multiple Supreme Court decisions. In light of this fact, the juxtaposition of Jefferson’s letter

to the Danbury Baptist Association and his presence at a religious service with a preacher *he chose* should not be ignored. The wall of separation between church and state that was created by the First Amendment is alive and well, but for Jefferson, that wall was permeable.

Notes

1. The original document has the word “eternal” before “separation,” but it was crossed out. Letters to two of Jefferson’s cabinet members who lived in New England, Attorney General Levi Lincoln and Postmaster General Gideon Granger, to vet the political import of the letter, illustrate the thought and effort that went into Jefferson’s reply. Granger believed the letter would “give great Offence to the established Clergy of New England while it will delight the Dissenters as they are called.” In summary: “He cannot therefore wish a Sentence changed, or a Sentiment expressed equivocally.” (December 1801 letter from Gideon Granger to Thomas Jefferson, in Dreisbach and Hall [528]). One must note the controversy rather than the clarification this letter created, both then and at present. For example, a “wall of separation” is restrictive in two directions, whereas the Constitution restricts acts of Congress against respecting a particular religion. Federalists, already no friends of Jefferson, saw this letter as furthering political atheism. See Daniel L. Dreisbach and James H. Hutson.
2. See Pasley (31–36). Criticism of Leland’s message illustrates the overt political divisions of the time. A Congregationalist clergyman and Federalist congressman named Manasseh Cutler referred to Leland as “the cheesemonger, a poor, ignorant, illiterate, clownish preacher” who, in alluding to Jefferson, “bawled with stunning voice, horrid tone, frightful grimaces, and extravagant gestures. . . . Such an outrage upon religion, the Sabbath, and common decency, was extremely painful to every sober, thinking person present.” See 4 January 1802 Letter from Manasseh Cutler to Joseph Torrey, qtd in Cutler and Egle, 2:66–67.
3. The other major founder whose thought held sway was James Madison, though Muñoz argues that George Washington deserves consideration as well.

4. The first mention of the document by the Supreme Court was for *Reynolds v. U.S.*, 98 U.S. 145 (1878), a case about religious liberty and the concept of religion (which is not defined by the Constitution). Other notable cases that referenced the document include *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947), which debated the use of government funds to bus students to a Catholic school; *Engle v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) which ruled unconstitutional mandatory school prayer; *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1968), over an Arkansas law that prohibited the teaching of evolution; and *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971), over funding secular subjects and materials in religious schools. This final case created the “Lemon test” to see if the Establishment Clause was being transgressed or not.
5. Religious services occurred in the Treasury and War Office buildings as well; see Hutson, *Forgotten Features* 63.
6. Although church services at the time were generally more solemn affairs with long expositions of scripture, the camp meetings occurring at the same time during the so-called Second Great Awakening were far from tame, with “elemental religious feelings” and “unusual bodily effects—the jerks, dancing, laughing, running, and ‘the barking exercise’” (see Noll 267). The atmosphere of the services at the Capitol would vary greatly depending on the week, but the emotion would fall between these two extremes.

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