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Heat Enough to Stifle, Cold Enough to Chill, All in the Month of July! Or, If You Don't Like the Weather . . .

July 18, 1774, Nomini Hall, Westmoreland County, Virginia

*Pray Sir let all our Windows be put up . . .
& let the Doors be set open or we shall
faint with Heat—Such a night I never
spent before—The Heat says he, and these
cursed Chinchies [bedbugs] made me in-
tirely restless.*

July 20, 1774, Nomini Hall

*Shut the Door . . . I'm so cold I shake—in-
deed the morning is cool enough to sit with
December clothes on!*

(Philip Fithian, *The Journal and Letters of
Philip Vickers Fithian*)

After 1723, Manumission Takes Careful Planning and Plenty of Savvy

by Linda Rowe

Linda, historian in the Department of Historical Research, is assistant editor of the Interpreter.

As the institution of slavery matured in colonial Virginia, slaveholders saw the small number of free blacks in the colony as a "great inconvenience" suspected of everything from receiving stolen goods and encouraging slaves to run away to fomenting rebellion. Moreover, "being grown old [they bring] a charge upon the country"—that is, aged free blacks who were unable to work, in principle at least, became eligible for support from the parishes in which they lived. Although the General Assembly never considered reenslavement of the existing free black population, it took measures to prevent slaveholders of "ill directed" generosity from adding to the numbers by setting slaves free.

In 1691, the General Assembly passed a law aimed at making masters think twice before freeing any of their slaves. While manumission by deed or will was legal under this law, it required a newly freed slave to leave the colony within six months and the former master to pay for the trip.

Although this legislation likely had a dampening effect on the urge to manumit, it is not clear how many slaves were freed and forced to leave Virginia during the thirty-two years it was in effect.

Manumission became much more difficult in 1723. Paragraph 17 of the 1723 Act Directing the Trial of Slaves, Committing Capital Crimes; and for the More Effectual Punishing Conspiracies and Insurrection of Them; and for the Better Government of Negros, Mulattos, and

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A Reverend's Life: "How Much History . . . in One Short Chapter?"

by Noel B. Poirier

Noel is a journeyman carpenter/joiner in the Department of Historic Trades and a member of the Interpreter Planning Board.

What a glorious morning for a hunt on this day in 1770! The August mist lay heavy across the woods and numerous rivulets that dotted the shoreline, obscuring their feathered residents. The reverend would miss these summer morning hunts when he finally moved permanently to his little Presbyterian haven in Virginia. The summers in Brookhaven, Long Island, lacked the oppressive heat and humidity of tidewater Virginia, and the breeze off the sound brought the pungent smell of the sea. Before leaving the house, he had asked his wife, Elizabeth, to have his dinner ready at one o'clock.

He walked a while longer, absorbing the sights, smells, and sounds of Long Island, wanting to keep them fresh in his memory before his exodus to Virginia. Setting his gun aside, he reattached a damaged fence rail just as his neighbor, Captain Strong, came upon him. Shortly after they parted as Captain Strong approached his home, a shot rang out in the distance, but unfortunately, it had not been aimed at any game. Apparently as he primed his pan with powder, the reverend turned his gun around and rested the butt on the ground with its short barrel pointed towards him, thus allowing him to load charge and shot down the muzzle. As he began to jerk the ramrod from its nest under the barrel, there was a crash and a flash of light and smoke as the gun discharged its deadly contents into the reverend's chest! The reverend's intentions for the Presbyterian community of Providence Forge, Virginia, the focus of the last two years of his life, died with him that morning.¹

Born to wealth in 1740, Charles Jeffrey Smith, the future reverend, would need no other source of income and, as his family was deeply religious, he was enrolled at Yale College in Connecticut. Graduating in 1757, he decided to devote the rest of his life to the Presbyterian Church and the ministering of God's teachings.

At the time, across Long Island Sound and on a branch of the Thames River in Connecticut, Eleazer Wheelock had begun ministering to and educating Native American boys. Smith traveled to the school, known as the Indian Charity School, and began serving as one of Wheelock's

instructors and closest advisors. While at the school, he served as a teacher and student, learning the Mohawk language from the young, Christianized Joseph Brandt.

Missionary work called out to Smith, yet the situation along the colonies' frontier was no place for novices. The Seven Years' War, pitting Britain and France against one another, led to an increase of violence on the part of the parties' native allies. Both sides unleashed their Native American allies on one another, resulting in destruction of the European American frontier settlements and Native American communities alike. Smith, however, could not be restrained from undertaking his first mission of God: travel to the Mohawk villages and preach the Gospel to the unconverted.²

Expecting ordination as a minister any day, Smith left the comforts of Wheelock's school behind and began his mission to the Mohawks in early 1763. While his study of the Mohawk language with Joseph Brandt had been fruitful, the young missionary hardly felt fluent in the tongue of his future flock. Luckily, Brandt was eager to demonstrate the seriousness of his studies and conversion; the young Mohawk brave would continue to instruct the missionary in the Mohawk language and would receive in return instruction from the missionary in English.

Plans for their undertaking continued throughout the spring, but rumblings from the frontier grew louder and louder over the ensuing months. Unaware that the actions of the Ottawa Chief Pontiac had set alight the frontier, the two were under way by July 1763, traveling up the Hudson River Valley and preaching to any Native Americans who would listen. The pair reached Johnson Hall, the home of Sir William Johnson, and was informed that, for their own safety, they would not be permitted to continue their mission. Crestfallen, the pair separated, the reverend returning to Connecticut and Brandt remaining with William Johnson.³ Smith's aborted mission to the tribes of the Iroquois did not deter the reverend from his strong desire to carry the Gospel to the far reaches of settlement. His solution was to become an itinerant preacher traveling throughout the colonies to spread the Word. His wanderings carried him from the isolated farms of the hills of Connecticut to the flat tidewater of Virginia.

In 1765 Presbyterians in and around Williamsburg, Virginia (including York and James City Counties), informed a local court that they would be using a house on the property of George Davenport in Williamsburg for a meetinghouse. The congregation did not have a permanent minister, so they planned on holding

services only when one happened to be passing through the city.⁴

The Reverend Smith's travels found him in Virginia at the home base of the eloquent Samuel Davies's Hanover Presbytery. Having ministered to Presbyterians in Hanover County for more than a dozen years, Davies died in 1761, after leaving Virginia in 1759 to assume the presidency of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). Hanover Presbytery continued to train and ordain Presbyterian ministers, a few of whom they sent on an interim basis to the Williamsburg Presbyterians. With its makeshift meetinghouse and leaderless congregation, Williamsburg was a logical destination for the drifting reverend.

The following advertisement appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* in July 1766: "And to be SOLD at Mr. Holt's store, next door to the Printing Office, Williamsburg, THE Nature and Necessity of Regeneration, considered in a discourse delivered at Williamsburg, in Virginia, with a dedication to the Episcopal Church in that city [Bruton Parish Church], containing an apology [a written defence] for Presbyterians. By Charles Jeffrey Smith, A.M." A copy of this sermon, published in 1765 in New Jersey, is preserved in Special Collections at Swem Library at the College of William and Mary. It shows that Smith preached the sermon in Williamsburg on July 25, 1765, just a few weeks after the local Presbyterians petitioned the court for a meetinghouse. Presbyterian Charles Jeffrey Smith had arrived in the capital city of one of the most Anglican colonies in North America.⁵ He may even have delivered the sermon in the "house on part of a lot belonging to George Davenport."

The Mr. Holt in question here was a Williamsburg merchant whose daughter Jane Holt had married Presbyterian Samuel Davies in the late 1740s. The above advertisement hints at a partnership between Reverend Smith and William Holt. On one side there was the Reverend Smith who, in his short life, had devoted himself to the propagation of the Gospel. Holt, on the other hand, was a Virginia merchant, diversified and successful in his business ventures. Holt had been conducting business in the city since 1760, before which he had overseen a warehouse in Yorktown for Francis Jerdone. The Holt family operated an iron forge and gristmill in New Kent County in the 1750s and 1760s and had acquired substantial amounts of land in New Kent and Charles City Counties.⁶

Holt appears to have conformed to the established (Anglican) church, but he was open to Smith's idea for a Presbyterian community in the area around William Holt's iron forge in New

Kent County. The Reverend Smith, with William Holt's assistance, determined to sell his land holdings in New York and invest the income in Holt's Forge and to establish a Presbyterian academy and meetinghouse. The income from the forge and other plantations was to be used to fund the academy, the meetinghouse, and missionaries to the frontiers of Virginia and North Carolina. Upon the formation of the partnership between Holt and Smith, the name of the forge was changed from Holt's Forge to Providence Forge, and the two men also constructed a mill in York County called Kennon's Mill. The Reverend Smith, meanwhile, without seeking permission or assistance from the Hanover Presbytery, embarked on his plans for Providence Forge.⁷

The plans for Smith's Presbyterian village moved forward considerably in 1769 when he purchased lands adjoining Providence Forge in Charles City County for the construction of his church and academy. Smith opened a subscription for the construction of a Presbyterian church, seventy feet long and forty feet wide

This copy of Smith's sermon is in the Manuscript and Rare Books Department, Special Collections, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

Samuel B. Smith THE Book 1767

NATURE AND NECESSITY
OF
REGENERATION,
Considered in a
DISCOURSE
DELIVERED
At WILLIAMSBURG, in VIRGINIA:
WITH
A DEDICATION to the Episcopal Church
in that City:
CONTAINING,
An Apology for PRESBYTERIANS.

By CHARLES JEFFERY SMITH, A. M.

So much as in me is, I am ready to preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also, for I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the Power of God unto Salvation, to every one that believeth, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.
St. Paul.

WOODBIDGE, in New-Jersey:
Printed by SAMUEL F. PARKER.
M.DCC.LXV.

with galleries and a steeple, at Providence Forge in February 1769.

Adding to his lands in adjacent New Kent County, the reverend purchased another 1,700 acres of land in Charles City County from William Holt in July 1769.⁸ He also began planning the construction and organization of the academy and what subjects it would teach. While he had not sought the support of the Hanover Presbytery, he did want to make sure he had the support of the predominantly Anglican population. The best way to reach them was through the *Virginia Gazette*, and the Reverend Smith devoted an entire page of that paper to his proposal.

Smith asserted that, while "William and Mary . . . will . . . shine in the Republic of Learning," there was "full room in this extensive colony, and real need of more seminaries of education." He then described the advantages of the location of the academy in Providence Forge, stating that it was "between those two capital rivers, James and York, and on a public road" halfway between Williamsburg and the Falls of the James. The distance from city life, rather than a detriment, was an asset because the students would be "sequestered from the daily temptations, and numerous avocations . . . which endanger the morals, and interrupt the studies of youth."

The Reverend Smith planned to erect a house "with good accommodations for the entertainment of fifty, or an hundred students, if necessary" and the "tutors and pupils" will both reside there providing "no interruption to study." The school would have two tutors initially to instruct the students: men of "liberal education, unblemished morals and indubitable scholastic merit."⁹

According to Smith, the intention of employing instructors with "unblemished morals" was because the "morals of the pupils . . . will be watched with pious vigilance, and formed with unremitting assiduity." No matter how fashionable certain activities were considered, they would not be permitted on the campus of Smith's academy.

The "amusements" to be prohibited included card playing, horse racing, cock fighting, and wrestling. The Reverend Smith asserted that all of the pupils would be considered as "his own children" and receive "parental affection and tenderness." Those students who proved especially incorrigible would be exposed to mild "corporal punishment" or expulsion.¹⁰

The reverend planned the curriculum of the intended academy around two branches: English and languages, arts and sciences. The former would educate the students in reading, writing,

and basic arithmetic, with an emphasis on the accurate teaching of the English language. The latter would provide a liberal studies curriculum including Greek, logic, rhetoric, philosophy, and astronomy. Smith stressed the importance of teaching the pupils the "art of speaking" so that they would appear as "reputable speakers in the pulpit, senate and at the bar." The academy's course of instruction would also include Latin, theology, law, physics, and politics. Smith ended his public proposal with the announcement that he had written a pamphlet describing, in detail, his "Plan for an Academy Dedicated to His Excellency Lord Botetourt."¹¹

In order for his Virginia mission to succeed, Smith continued to divest himself of his Long Island properties. This required that he travel frequently between Virginia and Long Island. He was at his home in Brookhaven, New York, in June 1770, when he attended a Masonic procession and had the opportunity to share his grandiose Virginia vision with his friend Ezra Stiles.

Stiles found Smith's "scheme . . . full of good Intention, but . . . wondered to see so good a mind so carried away." He observed to Smith that this new enterprise "would involve him in new cares & solitudes of a Worldly kind which would interfere with Spiritual & divine Life."¹² The Reverend Smith, however, "tho't otherwise" and continued to espouse the advantages of his planned academy and meetinghouse. That was the last time that he and Ezra Stiles spoke, for the reverend was dead two months later.

What would Providence Forge, Virginia, look like if the Reverend Charles Jeffrey Smith had succeeded in constructing his meetinghouse, academy, and Presbyterian community? There is little doubt that it would have been more than the tiny crossroads it is today. Unfortunately, Smith's untimely death also killed his dream of a Presbyterian academy in New Kent County. He composed his will at the height of his planning for the academy; thus, it resonates with his positive attitude toward the project. One of the most interesting aspects of his will is that portion relating to his properties in Virginia. It stated:

I leave to the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, commonly called Nassau Hall, all that certain messuage [sic] or parcel or tract of land that I own in James City, New Kent County, Virginia, in partnership with Mr. William Holt, with all the appurtenances, to propagate the blessed Gospel of Christ, in the manner following, viz.: 1. Out of the income there shall be yearly paid 6 Spannish [sic] milled Dollars to each of the Colleges at Cambridge, in

*New England [Harvard], New Haven [Yale], and Princetown [College of New Jersey, now Princeton], to support three annual Lectures, to be preached by some able, pious minister before the students of each of the said colleges, on the following subjects: The Nature and Necessity of Regeneration; The Nature and Necessity of Justification by Faith Alone; The Dignity, Utility, Greatness, and Importance of the Gospel Ministry. 2. As soon as the income is sufficient, the Trustees are to support and maintain an able orthodox Godly minister, to itinerate three years in preaching the Gospel to the white people and negroes [sic] in the Southern Colonies that most need it and are least able to support it. And let none be employed but those who will engage to serve three years in the Cause. 3d. After the above is performed, the rest of the income is to be expended in such manner as will most effectually promote Christian knowledge among the poor heathen of the Aboriginal natives of America.*¹³

The Reverend Smith named as his executors in Virginia Julius King Burbridge and Bartholomew Dandridge. They placed Smith's portion of the partnership with Holt up for public auction along with Smith's own properties, which included a large brick dwelling house stocked with a "large and valuable collection of books."¹⁴ Francis Jerdone purchased Reverend Smith's interest in the forge and mills, and, together with Holt, the Jerdones ran the Providence Forge ironworks throughout the Revolutionary War.

At the time of Reverend Smith's death, the Providence Forge operation consisted of "a well built Forge . . . two well built Water Grist Mills . . . a Bolting Mill . . . a well built Saw Mill . . . several Dwelling houses with Brick Chimnies [sic], a large Storehouse, Granary, Smith's Shop, and many other convenient Houses . . . all newly built, in the best manner; and a good fishery."¹⁵ Smith had invested a considerable amount of money in his Virginia venture.

Although the reverend passed away before he could complete his plan to convert the little crossroads of Holt's Forge into a thriving Presbyterian community, his legacy lived on in the name now assigned to that fork: Providence Forge. Smith, in his short life, touched the lives of countless people. Many of these, like Joseph Brandt, Eleazer Wheelock, and Ezra Stiles, are familiar while others are not.

Smith, in his thirty years, had instructed Mohawk children in Connecticut, preached to Iroquois warriors in the Hudson Valley of New York, roamed the middle colonies as an itinerant minister, and developed a plan to establish the first Presbyterian institution of higher learning in Virginia. Upon hearing of Smith's death, Ezra Stiles confided in his diary: "How much History comprized [sic] in one short Chapter?"¹⁶

¹ Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., President of Yale College*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 62–63; *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), 1 November 1770, 1–2. The true circumstances surrounding the shooting are still unknown. One source claims that, years later, a slave admitted to killing the reverend. There was also some discussion that the reverend may have committed suicide. I have chosen to present the death as it was presented at the time, as a hunting accident.

² Katherine L. Brown, "The Role of Presbyterian Dissent in Colonial and Revolutionary Virginia, 1740–1785" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1969), 255–260; Robert J. Taylor, *Colonial Connecticut: A History* (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1979), 163; Isabel Thompson Kelsay, *Joseph Brandt, 1743–1807, Man of Two Worlds* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 87–88.

³ Kelsay, *Joseph Brandt*, 88–94.

⁴ Lyon G. Tyler, *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, vol. 5 (1924; reprint, New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1967), 66–67.

⁵ James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 1996), 53–54; Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians* (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1993), 148–149; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 4 July 1766.

⁶ George William Dilcher, *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), 35. Holt's Forge is recorded on the Fry-Jefferson Map (1755). Kathleen Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era* (New York and London: The Century Company, 1931), 19–20.

⁷ Dexter, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 63; "Providence Forge," *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, n.s., 5 (June 1896): 20–22; Howard Miller, *The Revolutionary College: American Presbyterian Higher Education, 1707–1837* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 124–125.

⁸ "Providence Forge," *William and Mary College Quarterly*, 20; "Records from the Charles City County Deed Book," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 22 (December 1914): 436.

⁹ *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), 1 March 1770, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Dexter, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 55–56.

¹³ Will of Charles Jeffrey Smith as found in *Collections of the New-York Historical Society, Abstracts of Wills on File in the Surrogate's Office, City of New York*, vol. 7 (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1898), 327–329.

¹⁴ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 24 January 1771, 3, col. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Dexter, *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 62.