Introduction

# BATTLEFIELDS AND BELIEVERS

*The recent war…has so impoverished our people, and crippled our resources that I have refrained from urging upon your attention such measures…because of the inability of the people to meet the expenditures involved in their execution.*

—*Fredericksburg mayor, 1866*

In order to understand the experiences of the historic churches of Fredericksburg, one must first look at the locality and the important role that organized religion played in the town. Today, the town is known as "America's Most Historic City," while the neighboring county of Spotsylvania is referred to as the "Crossroads of the Civil War." Both are literally saturated with landmark homesteads, museums, plantations and battlefields that draw thousands of tourists each and every year. Churches remain among some of the most coveted attractions for their historical significance and architectural beauty.

Fredericksburg has also been referred to as a "city of churches," as its silhouette is dominated by a plethora of bell towers and steepled roofs. Today there are over three hundred congregations spread throughout the surrounding region. Clearly, anyone walking through the town can see the important role religion played in the day-to-day lives of the town's inhabitants. Chartered in 1728, the settlement served as the surrounding area's political, social and economic center. As it was conveniently located on the banks of the Rappahannock River, Fredericksburg quickly became a bustling metropolis, with taverns, lodging and commerce. Both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industries such as mills, shipping and transportation helped to establish the town as a commercial beacon on the ever-expanding map of central Virginia.

Despite a widespread disenchantment among America's first settlers with the Church of England, religion remained a precious keystone in colonial life. Many of the area's first citizens still retained their belief in God and brought the deep desire to practice their faith with them when they came to this new land. It was the freedom to pursue that faith in a variety of forms that separated the early Protestant and even Catholic churches from their European counterparts. Therefore, churches were significantly important institutions in the foundation of any settlement in the New World.

Fredericksburg Courthouse today. *Courtesy Fredericksburg Tourism.*

The original English settlement of Fredericksburg had been clustered in a fifty-acre area along the west bank of the river. It was originally engineered in a grid-like pattern, with wide streets that were named after British royalty. The initial plot consisted of sixty-four equally sized lots with two extra spaces for a church and a market. As the population increased, Fredericksburg found it necessary to expand the municipal boundaries. By 1759, the city had tripled its physical size, opening the door to both new merchants and settlers alike. Eventually, the boundary line was pushed westward toward the area known as the "Sunken Road." This hallowed ground witnessed the brunt of the Battle of Fredericksburg and is a national military park today.

Historically, the town of Fredericksburg is especially noteworthy with regard to all American faiths. It was here, at an establishment known as Weedon's Tavern, where Thomas Jefferson met with his political contemporaries in 1777 and agreed to author a bill for religious liberties in America. Today, the Religious Freedom Monument stands as a testament to that event. The simple marker was first unveiled in 1932 and consists of a small obelisk made of hewn stone blocks. It is a tribute to Jefferson's words, which resulted in the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom.

The statute, enacted in 1786, separated church and state and gave equal status to all faiths. It became the basis for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, giving all Americans the freedom to practice the religion of their choice or none at all. Jefferson himself proclaimed this bill to be one of his three proudest achievements, alongside authoring the Declaration of Independence and founding the University of Virginia. In

fact, these three accomplishments are the only ones that he deemed worthy to inscribe on his grave marker at Monticello.

In 1828, Fredericksburg residents realized that the development of their city was seriously lagging behind the nearby cities of Alexandria (to the north) and Richmond (to the south). As a result, they launched a thirty-year improvement plan that included a water navigation system and road improvements. Fredericksburg also wanted to compete with the nearby town of Falmouth, which had established a stable economy based on the industrial processing of flour. By 1830, both towns collectively boasted a flour-inspection rate of 125,000 barrels a year. However, output dropped dramatically to under 60,000 barrels annually in 1847. This decline hurt the local economy and did nothing to help cover the costs of the city's fledging revitalization plans.

Unfortunately, many of Fredericksburg's long-term projects proved to be poorly planned or executed. By 1858, most had fallen into bankruptcy after uncoordinated and intermittent attempts to complete them were unsuccessful. The news editors of the *Semi-Weekly News*, *Christian Banner* and *Weekly Advertiser* spared no words when they wrote pieces taking the citizens to task for their "lack of energy and enterprise," as well as their penchant for mediocrity. Clearly the town's officials did not anticipate the requirements of their plans, nor did they prepare any contingencies in the event of failures.

Eventually many of these developmental matters were tended to, but a rift remained between the citizens of the city who found differences in social, political and spiritual aspects of life. Slaveholding was a particularly sensitive issue, as the town's white citizens were divided along pro- and antislavery lines. Numbers of influential white citizens held meetings at the town hall calling for the support of African colonization. These meetings were deemed unpopular by many, as the institution of slavery in the Old Dominion had been in place for generations.

Traced back to the earliest colonization of America, human bondage remained one of the most controversial aspects of the country's culture. The first Africans arrived in the New World as indentured servants at the Virginia Company's Jamestown Settlement in 1619. There, they were initially able to earn their freedom by working as laborers, artisans, servants and cooks for white European settlers. However, the role of indentured servant was radically redefined by 1640, when the colony of Maryland became the first settlement to officially institutionalize slavery. The practice was then propagated in the North in 1641, when Massachusetts legalized it by establishing in the legislative Body of Liberties that "bondage," in certain circumstances, was lawful. This act inevitably ushered in the ability for one human being to hold property ownership of another human being.

The early Christian churches did not take up the cause of eliminating slavery until much later in the century, and some church leaders attempted to justify the act by quoting passages from the Bible that outlined the proper treatment of slaves, specifically Deuteronomy 15:12–15, Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1. In 1693, the famous Boston theologian Cotton Mather wrote a propaganda piece titled "Rules for the Society of the Negroes," in which he argued that slavery had been spiritually sanctioned and that "Negroes were enslaved because they had sinned against God."

By 1833, a movement was underway to end the institution of slavery, as organizations such as the American Anti-Slavery Society—which later boasted such prominent black members as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman—came to fruition. Many white abolitionists, mostly Northerners, joined the movement that used a mix of social and political methods to bring attention to the suffering of the slave population. With an economy that was heavily dependent on forced labor, the Southern states, including Virginia, were less than eager to emancipate the slaves. This led to a strong divide between the citizens on both sides of the issue.

Renowned British author Charles Dickens recalled a trip to Fredericksburg, where he boarded a train with a detestable passenger who was a "champion of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" and had just "separated a slave family through his purchase." A European visitor to the town wrote to his relatives that he had been awakened by the cries of a Negro who was undergoing a "severe correction."

In 1842, the Englishman James Buckingham published his own description of an encounter with a group of owned Africans while passing through the area toward Falmouth. He wrote:

> *In a valley near this* [town], *we met a gang of slaves, including men, women, and children, the men chained together in pairs, and the women carrying the children and bundles, in their march to the South. The gang was under several white drivers who rode near them on horseback, with large whips…and there was one driver behind…They were chained together for precaution rather than for punishment.*

Of all the accounts regarding suffrage in the Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania area, perhaps none is as disturbing as those from the field hands themselves. Regardless of the popular notion of a pastoral antebellum South filled with the romance and pageantry of *Gone with the Wind*, the day-to-day lives of those held in bondage were filled with fear and misery. One Spotsylvania slave reminisced on an experience he had suffered during a wheat harvest in 1855. He recalled:

> *I was cradling—I couldn't make the cradle cut well. S—[the owner] said, "You can make that cradle cut better if you choose to…but you don't choose to." I told him I had tried to make it do the best I know how. Then he said to the men, "Come here and take hold of this d—d nigger, I'll make it all right with him." Then he took me to the barn…While he was tying me up, I told him, I will do all I know how to do. He said "[I]t was a d—d lie"…but he knew I could do it…and when he was done with me, he'd show that I would do it. Then he commenced to whipping me…Before he took me down, he said, "Now will you go and do the business?" I told him then, that "I had told [you] before that I would willingly do all I knew how."*

In 1858, almost half of the 150-member congregation at the Fredericksburg United Methodist Church was publicly chastised by its fellow believers for "harboring a deep rooted hostility toward the institution of slavery." There were many Methodists who

were willing to stand up against the practice, no matter how unpopular their views were among the denomination's proslavery parishioners.

This wasn't the first time such a debate raged. In 1844, the Methodist church had already split over the issue of slavery, forming two congregations. Methodist Church (North) was located on the site of the current church and Methodist Church (South) was located on George Street. For about a decade, there was also a separate black Methodist church in town, but it burned down in 1854. The neighboring Baptist church also featured an integrated congregation, with separate entrances and galleries for slaves and free blacks, until 1855. Then the white members moved to the new sanctuary and sold the old church to the black members for $500. Thus was born the African Baptist Church.

These newly formed institutions enabled the black congregations to worship together, although they still remained under the supervision of a white elder, who was required by law to supervise the proceedings. This paternalistic approach no doubt sullied the sincerity of goodwill that was directed toward the black worshipers. There were rare examples of white citizens compromising on the institution, but their efforts fell far short of true emancipation. One such example recalls the story of a local slave shoemaker named Noah Davis, who was assisted by Fredericksburg's prominent citizens as he pursued his family's freedom and a career as a minister. The Patton family, in particular, pledged to sell Davis his independence and allowed him to travel to raise the required funds. Neighboring families also helped. The Stevenson family agreed to sell his wife's freedom and the Wright family helped Davis to finance the purchase of his children.

Ms. Hannah Coalter of the palatial Chatham Manor offered all ninety-two of her slaves a choice between immigration and continued bondage after her death. Although the offer appears to be a generous one, it should be noted that it was on an individual basis and had no stipulation for keeping relatives together. This resulted in an agonizing choice of freedom over one's family. Coalter's successor, Horace Lacy, was not interested in granting freedom to any of Chatham's slaves. He filed a grievance with the Virginia Supreme Court system to overturn Ms. Coalter's offer. The court sided with the plaintiff, citing that the servant population of Fredericksburg was not considered citizenry and therefore had no right to make decisions regarding their release.

This powder-keg relationship between the town's different races provided an explosive backdrop for political discord. In 1860, many of the city's white citizens labored to prevent secession. Despite a very public and popular outrage over the John Brown revolt at Harpers Ferry, most residents continued to argue over the long-term benefits of such a drastic endeavor as dissolving the Union. The local newspapers fueled the fire of discontent with their angry remarks following the victory of Republican presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln. Most recommended economic boycotts and other nonviolent forms of protest.

As tempers continued to flare, the Fredericksburg Young Men's Christian Association initiated prayer meetings in both the local Baptist church and St. George's to seek divine intervention against the impending "anarchy that now prevails." The existing churches were often used during these times for both public discussions and petitions.