

# Richard Major

## 1722 to 1796

- ✓ Richard Major is a valuable part of Baptist heritage in Virginia. He was one of the first Baptist preachers in Northern Virginia.
- ✓ Planted Frying Pan, Bull Run and Popeshead churches in Fairfax County; Happy Creek Church in Frederick County; and pastored Kettocton Church in Loudoun County and Buck Marsh Church in Frederick County; and helped David Thomas found the Little River Church in Loudoun County.
- ✓ *Morgan Edwards' 1772 Virginia Notebook* stated of Richard Major: "Very successful—Began with reading sermons—sometimes read what was not in [the book]...."
- ✓ Buried in the Hutchison family cemetery behind their home on Pleasant Valley Road. Richard Major purchased part of the Hutchison land tract.

What can we learn from our Virginia Baptist heritage?

### Fellowship

Our people have thrived on fellowship!

"The Associations continued thus happy and thus increasing, insomuch, that at their fifth or sixth session, it appears they received delegates from some churches as high up as the mountains, and from thence to the ocean. In 1767 some of the Spotsylvania preachers attended the Association, and obtained the attendance of a presbytery, to constitute their first church. The sessions were all held in the vicinity of Stearns and the older preachers. The younger ones, from Virginia and both the Carolinas, attended constantly, and derived much knowledge and consolation from the conversation of the more experienced. From such accounts as can be had, it appears that all these Associations were conducted with peace and harmony, and were productive of extensive usefulness." *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, Robert Semple, pp. 66, 67.

Let's not be unrealistic — they did have their differences. Semple tells that in Spotsylvania some preachers were fussing with others because they thought they "were not sufficiently particular in small matters, such as dress...." (ibid, p. 67)

On a grander scale they debated the importance of the qualifications of the administrator of a baptism. James Hutchinson, from Loudoun County Virginia, went to Georgia and "there first became a Methodist and then a Baptist preacher. Previous to his joining the Baptists he had been baptized by a Methodist preacher." (ibid., p. 391). In Georgia the Baptists debated the validity of his baptism (because it was performed by an unbaptized person, i.e. Methodist) and decided that it was. After moving to Virginia the question caused "considerable agitation" among the Baptist preachers. Mr. Hutchinson had preached effectively and many had been saved. He baptized them. Was their baptism valid? "They determined not to receive either him [Hutchinson] or those baptized by him, unless they would submit to be rebaptized. After some time they consented and the ordinance was readministered." (ibid, p. 391).

There were differences, discussions but great benefit...primarily because the younger preachers could spend time with the older ones.

### Stand

1. **Personal attacks** did not dissuade Major. There are stories about many efforts to do him bodily harm for his ministry of the gospel. James Taylor in *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, written in 1860, wrote about "the rude treatment he received from the enemies of Christ." One story was about a man whose wife Major had baptized. He determined to kill Major on sight. He attended a meeting where Major was preaching and waited for an opportunity to catch some negative

expression from the sermon to provide an excuse to attack him. Rather, he came under conviction and was saved.

**2. Political situations** provided our Baptist brethren an opportunity to stand.

- 1) Slavery — In 1787 the Kettocton Association of Baptist debated the question of slavery and decided that it breached divine law. In 1791 Major established the Frying Pan Church. Their meeting house still stands on Centreville Road. In 1840 the congregation consisted of 33 whites and 29 blacks.
- 2) Preaching Contrary to Law — Major was among those arrested for preaching the gospel contrary to law. This led to the incidents of Patrick Henry's defending them in court, and sparked the efforts of James Madison, Elder John Leland, and others which led to the adoption of that portion of the first Amendment to the Constitution relating to freedom of religion.
- 3) Tax Dollars to Clergy — On February 21, 1785 the Georgia legislature passed an act which called for the taxing of the population "four pence on every hundred pounds valuation of property" to pay for the clergy who ministered in the churches. Baptists, whose ministers would have benefited financially from the act, rose up in united opposition to the practice. They believed that it was not the governments place to support any particular religion through taxation. Due to their efforts the act was repealed. Throughout the 1780's the same principle was debated in Virginia. Due to the efforts of men like David Thomas (church planter in northern Virginia) 10,000 signatures were obtained and presented to the Virginia state legislators to show their opposition. It is due to the efforts of our Baptist forefathers that we enjoy many of our religious liberties today (Wayne Thompson & David Cummins, *This Day in Baptist History*, pp. 72, 73).

## **Plant Churches**

This is our theme as Baptists! Our Virginia forefathers were diligent in planting churches here in Northern Virginia.

Of course, they had their difficulties. After Richard Major had left the church at Bull Run they secured Thomas Bridges as pastor. Bridges became an embarrassment to his peers and ended up in prison for scandal (Semple, op.cit., p. 402).

The oldest church in the Kettocton Association, Mill Creek Church (Berkeley, W.Va.), prospered greatly under their pastor, David Thomas. Division erupted as a small group accused Thomas of preaching false doctrine. They were excommunicated and established an independent church. The pastor, discouraged by it all, ended up moving to Kentucky.

But there were much more **healthy divisions** which occurred....

Two church planting success stories (both pastored by Major):

1) Little River Church (Loudoun) — Grew rapidly. In two years they had 272 members. "Her branches, however, extended into the neighboring parts. When any of these branches became sufficiently numerous they were constituted into new churches, by which the mother church was reduced in numbers. During Mr. Major's life they were a happy and united people, greatly attached to their minister." (ibid, p. 395)

2) Bull Run Church (Fairfax) — "When the Gospel was carried here by the admirable and amiable Richard Major a great revival of religion arose, so that in a little time a church was constituted having 126 members. From the constitution of new churches, etc., their number had become somewhat reduced, until about 1792 they had the smiles of Heaven and large additions were made. Not many less than a hundred were baptized, by which this church rose to higher prosperity than she had ever previously enjoyed." (ibid, p. 402)