

BARROW FILE # 1

1. CIRCULAR LETTER. Southampton County, Virginia; February 14, 1798. Notes and Documents;
David Barrow's Circular Letter of 1798 by Carlos R. Allen, Jr. 11. Pages.

CIRCULAR LETTER.

SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY,

VIRGINIA;

FEBRUARY 14, 1798.

*For tho' I make you sorry with a Letter, I shall
not repent.*

2 Cor. VII. 8

NORFOLK:

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR;

BY *WILLETT & O'CONNOR*, NEAR THE MARKET

Notes and Documents

David Barrow's *Circular Letter* of 1798

Carlos R. Allen, Jr.*

IN 1798 the Reverend David Barrow wrote a letter to his Baptist congregation in Southampton, Virginia, giving the reasons for his departure from Virginia for the West. This *Circular Letter*, reprinted below, clearly demonstrates the connection between religious concepts, political ideals, and antislavery feeling among the adherents of Thomas Jefferson. In giving expression to his most deeply felt convictions on religion, politics, and slavery Barrow produces a summary of the political philosophy of the Jeffersonian Republicans as it was popularly understood. Alongside his statement of political belief, Barrow placed an exposition of his religious faith, an orthodox Calvinism. Barrow's *Circular Letter*, with its implicit correlation between political and religious beliefs, is most significant as the statement of one speaking for the too often inarticulate yeomanry on the eve of the Great Revival of 1800 and of Jefferson's triumph in the same year.

David Barrow was born on October 30, 1753, in Brunswick County in central Virginia, the second son of Amy Lee and William Barrow. Only a few scant facts have come to us of his early life on the farm, but we know that by his seventeenth birthday he had been moved by a strong religious experience, joined the Baptist Church, and determined upon the ministry as a career. By 1772 the young convert had studied grammar briefly with Elder Jeremiah Walker, received his ordination, married Sarah Gilliam of Sussex County, and embarked upon an itinerant ministry in Virginia and North Carolina.

Barrow went to serve a General Baptist congregation in the Isle of Wight County, Virginia, in 1774. Here, like most Baptist ministers he gained his living from his farm while his preaching brought little tangible

* Mr. Allen is a member of the Department of History, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

ward. He read avidly, improved his oratory and exhortation, and seems to have become a respected preacher. He and his wife began to raise a family which would ultimately number twelve children. To farming and preaching he added public service as a local magistrate, which after several years he gave up because he felt that his public duties were interfering with his ministerial responsibilities.¹

Disturbed by religious, political, and economic evils inherent in slavery, Barrow freed his own slaves as early as 1784. Finding competition within the slave economy difficult, he decided to leave Virginia in the late 1790's and migrate to Kentucky where it then seemed probable the institution of slavery would not prosper.² Once in Kentucky, Barrow led an active life as a popular preacher and continued his outspoken opposition to slavery.³ In 1808 he published a fifty-page pamphlet denouncing hereditary slavery largely on moral and political grounds.⁴

The *Circular Letter* of 1798, printed below, voices similar arguments in a simplified form. Like other members of the evangelical sects, Barrow adopted the political philosophy of the liberals when he found that they opposed the continuation of the Episcopal Establishment that had placed Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others at a disadvantage for so long.⁵ The summary of his political creed reflects much of the social and political thought of the later years of the eighteenth century. In it are concepts from George Mason's Virginia Bill of Rights of 1776 and the Declaration of Independence and echoes of the still current dispute over the far-reaching revision of the statutes of Virginia. Jefferson's statute for

¹For biographical data see James B. Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers, Ser. I* (New York, 1860), 161-171; and John H. Spencer, *A History of the Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1883* (Cincinnati, 1886), I, 192-197.

²Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky* (New York, 1937), 288-289. The Kentucky Constitution of 1792 in Article IX specifically indicates the defeat of the antislavery faction. Francis Newton Thorpe, *Federal and State Constitutions...* (Washington, 1909), III, 1272-1273.

³Frank L. Masters, *A History of the Baptists in Kentucky* (Louisville, 1953), 51, 90-91, 160, 168; Spencer, *Kentucky Baptists*, 17; Mary S. Locke, *Anti-Slavery in America from the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade: 1619-1808* (Boston, 1901), 43-44; William Birney, *James G. Birney and His Times...* (New York, 1890), 17-18; David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (New York, 1848), 122.

⁴*Involuntary, Unmerited, Perpetual, Absolute, Hereditary Slavery, Examined; Or the Principles of Nature, Reason, Justice, Policy, and Scripture* (Lexington, Ken., 1808).

⁵Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, I, 163-165; Thomas Cuming Hall, *The Religious Background of American Culture* (New York, 1959), 182, 188; Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, N. C., 1930), 135.

religious freedom and his bill for proportioning crimes and punishments, both a part of this revision, certainly are reflected in Barrow's political creed. But the most important and most obvious source of his political thinking is the Virginia Bill of Rights. The reader of the *Circular Letter* will recognize that Mason's document not only supplied Barrow with many of the ideas he expressed but that Barrow often used Mason's exact words. (See, for examples, subheadings 5, 7-10, 14-17, 19, 21, and 25 of "A Summary of My Political Creed" in the *Circular Letter*.)

The *Circular Letter* was printed for the author by Willett and O'Connell of Norfolk in 1798 and distributed by Barrow to his congregation. Including the title page, it was fourteen pages long. There is no reference to it either in Joseph Sabin's *Biblioteca Americana* or in Charles Evans's *American Bibliography*. My edition of the *Circular Letter* which follows was made from a photographic reproduction of the copy in the possession of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society in Richmond and is reprinted with permission of that society and its secretary, Mr. Woodford B. Hackley. I have corrected obvious typographical errors but have retained the original spelling and punctuation. The only previous effort to reproduce the text of this pamphlet was made by the Virginia Baptist historian, James B. Taylor, on the eve of the Civil War, and it is indicative of the spirit of those troubled times that all references to slavery were carefully deleted.

CIRCULAR LETTER.

Very Dear Brethren,

FRIENDS AND FELLOW-CITIZENS,

I am in hopes you will excuse me for calling your attention a few minutes, and taking up a portion of your valuable time to what follows: Seeing it is the first, and in all probability will be the last time, I ever shall address in this, or any other manner. On long, and very serious deliberation, I have come to a determination, under Divine Providence, to move my residence from this country to the state of Kentucky.* As I have for many years been exercising my feeble talents, in the sacred work of the Ministry, which has been the means of procuring me a great number of very respectable acquaintance, most of whom I have no opportunity of seeing personally, between this and the time of my removal; who, when they hear I am gone, will naturally be led to enquire into the cause or causes thereof. For the satisfaction of such enquirers, and as a memorial of my unabated affection for them; and withal, to stop the mouths of some few enemies that I may have in this country, who in my absence may take the liberty to let out some ungenerous sayings, concerning the motives of my moving, the doctrines I have preached, and the principles I hold; I think it best to open my sentiments to the world at large, before I leave this part of the union: And I flatter myself no man living, is, or can be so well acquainted with the reasons which govern me in moving my residence, and with my religious and political faith, as I am; I therefore take the liberty of answering for myself, and hope I shall be indulged. 1st. While I shall give the reasons of my moving my residence. 2d. While I exhibit a summary of my creed, both in a religious and political point of view. 3d. While I express my parting prayers and wishes on various occasions.

1st. The reasons of my moving my residence. Negatively. 1st. It is not out of any personal prejudice against any man, woman, child, or party under Heaven.

2. Nor is it to accumulate great stores of wealth for my children. For we are informed by the lip of inspiration, *That they who will be rich shall*

* If any of my friends should find freedom to favor me with a line at any time, they will be pleased to enclose and direct their letters to *Thomas Lewis, Esquire*, near Lexington, Kentucky; he is a particular acquaintance of mine; by this method I shall be sure to get them, for it is not yet absolutely certain in what part of the Western country I shall settle.

into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.

3. Nor is it on account of the present deadness and coldness of religion; for I am well convinced in my own mind, that God will again revive his work in these parts.

4. Nor is it to get rid of temptations, trials and troubles; for we learn, *that affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground; yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.*

Affirmatively. The reasons of my changing the place of my residence — are, 1st. I find by long experience, and constant efforts, that I cannot comfortably support my family, educate my children, and attend so much to public calls, as I have done, with my means, in this poor country, without falling into the line of speculation, or that of holding slaves,† or sticking closely and personally to my farm. To let my family suffer is inconsistent with scripture and reason. *If any provide not for his own, and especially for they of his own household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.* The business of speculation, I think incompatible with the work of the ministry; or at any rate, it is very difficult duly to attend to both. And that of holding, tyrannizing over, and driving slaves, I view as contrary to the laws of God and nature. And if I must turn into the business of agriculture, which I think a safe and honorable employment, common sense dictates, that it would be most adviseable in a country, where the God of Nature has been the most liberal with his bounties, in respect to soil, &c.

2. Another reason is, that by the sale of my property, I may draw enough out, to pay my just debts, which I have been obliged to contract for the support of my family, and other unavoidable expences, while I have been otherways employed: which I cannot do with my means, and comfortably subsist in this part of the union.

3. That I may, with the blessing of God, and common care and industry, be enabled to procure an honest, comfortable livelihood for my family, and be able, moderately, to educate my children.

4. One distinguishing *trait* in the ministerial character is, *That he should be a man given to hospitality.* Whereas, in my situation, with my incomes, I cannot exercise that disposition as duty calls for, without severely feeling it afterwards; therefore, I leave this country, and move to one where nature has been more bountiful.

† The Author, from a conviction of the iniquity, and a discovery of the inconsistency of hereditary slavery, with a republican form of government, manumitted his slaves in the year 1784.

II. Exhibit a summary of my Creed, in a religious and political point of view.

1st. I believe in only one, indivisible, eternal, all-wise, all-powerful, all-holy, all-just, all-good, self-existing, self-governed, omniscient, omnipresent GOD; and that in Deity there are three divine PERSONALITIES, different in character and office, but strictly ONE, in design, nature and essence, the FATHER, the SON, and the HOLY GHOST.

2. I believe the inspiration, and infallibility of the Holy Scriptures, as contained in the Old and New Testaments.

3. I believe the existence of an everlasting Covenant, between the Father, and Son, to secure the salvation of God's Elect.

4. I believe the decrees of God, are eternal, consistent, wise, and immutable, and that they extend to all matters and things in universe; yet not so as to exclude the use of means; but rather that certain and proper means are decreed, to bring about certain and fixed ends, in his universal government.

5. That God elected, or choose his people in Christ, before all worlds, as a sovereign act of his own good pleasure, without any good or evil thing, foreseen in them, as moving him thereto, or preventing him therefrom.

6. That man was created in a state of innocency, but through the seduction of Satan, being left to his own natural powers, fell into transgression, by eating the forbidding fruit, by which he became an enemy to God. The whole fountain of human nature being defiled, so that by this single act of disobedience the whole race of human creatures, justly fell under condemnation, and are born into this world in a state of darkness, corruption, slavery to Satan, and a whole train of lawless passions, lusts, and appetites, without either inclination, or power to will, or do the mind of God, till influenced thereto by the powerful operations of the divine spirit.

7. That it is God's prerogative, and that it is consistent with his law and sacred perfections, to justify the ungodly, through Christ's engagement, or by imputing his righteousness to them.

8. I believe the incarnation of the *Son* or *word* of God.

9. I believe the all-sufficiency of Christ's atonement, for the pardon of all those whom he represented.

10. I believe the absolute necessity of conversion, regeneration, in a work of sanctification, on the souls of fallen creatures; not to justify them, but to fit, or make them meet for eternal glory.

11. That good works naturally result from sanctification, and should be zealously maintained by all Christians, *for necessary uses. For these things are good and profitable to men.*

12. I believe the safety, final security, and certain salvation, of all those

whom Christ represents; for as much as they are justified of God, called, and sanctified by the Holy Ghost.

13. That Christ did constitute a Church, the foundation, plan, and government of which, is plainly to be found in the New Testament; and that professing, and ordily believers only, have a right to membership.

14. That the ordinances in the Church are two, Baptism and the Supper. And that Baptism is only rightly administered, when it is performed by a properly qualified person, on an ordily professing believer, by dipping or plunging the whole body in water, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. And that the Supper is only properly administered and received, when it is handed out and partaken of, by such persons as the Scripture directs, and eaten and drunk, in a loving and discerning manner, the Laity, with the Clergy, having a right to the wine, as well as bread.

15. That there will be a resurrection of the just and unjust; also, that the righteous shall enjoy eternal happiness, and that the wicked shall suffer everlasting and unceasing damnation.*

A Summary of my Political Creed.

1st. I believe the natural equality of man, except in some monstrous cases.

2. I believe that liberty, with a right to a good character, of acquiring and possessing property, with the enjoyment of life and members, and the means of defending them, is the unalienable privilege of all complexions, shapes, and sizes of men, who have not forfeited those blessings by their own personal misdemeanors.

3. I believe that Government is an evil, as it cannot be supported without making considerable sacrifices of natural liberty; but, in our present state of depravity, it is to be preferred to a state of nature.

4. That Government, is a civil compact, of a people emerging from a state of nature, contrived by themselves for their own severity, and is subject to the controul, and liable to alteration, when thought proper by a majority of such community.

5. That no man can be bound in person, or property, but by laws of his own making, or that of his representatives, fairly chosen.

6. That all natural born citizens, arriving at an age, the community

* The writer is apprised, that sundry articles of his faith in each point of view, will be objected to by some; but he would have chosen rather to have been silent, than not to have exhibited a true specimen of his real sentiments. The authorities that support them, are not brought forward, nor would the contracted bounds of a letter admit of it; but he flatters himself, that they are sufficiently established by scripture, reason, and common observation.

may have a call for their services, with all emigrants, having conformed to the rules of naturalization, are entitled to the right of suffrage.

7. That no description of men, having gained such confidence of their fellow citizens, as to have a majority of suffrages in fair and free elections, can be excluded the office of Judge, Representative, &c.

8. That Representatives and Judges, are trustees and servants of the People, and are constantly accountable to them.

9. That it would be good for a community, that no man exercise more than one office under government, at the same time, of any kind whatsoever.

10. That the military, ought to be under strict subordination to the civil power.

11. That Representatives should be chosen annually.

12. That all officers or servants of the People, should have moderate, but sufficient salaries, fixed by law.

13. That all religious tests, and ecclesiastical establishments, are oppressive, and infringing the rights of conscience.

14. That civil rulers have nothing more to do with religion, in their public capacities, than private men; save only, that they should protect its professors in the uninterrupted enjoyment of it, with life, property, and character, in common with other good citizens.

15. That no man, or set of men, in a community, are entitled to exclusive privileges.

16. That the Liberty of the Press, and the People's right to express their grievances, cannot be restrained, but by tyrannical governments.

17. That a well regulated militia, is the best natural defence of a free government.

18. I believe, in a situation like ours, that an indissoluble union, and well planned confederation of the States, are essentially necessary to their safety and well being.

19. That trial by jury, though liable to some exceptions, is most to be depended on.

20. That unreasonable or excessive bail should never be required of any man.

21. That tortures, to force confession of suspected crimes, are cruel and heathenish.

22. That long and unnecessary imprisonment, is tyrannical.

23. That general warrants, to search suspected places, should never be granted, but on probable evidence.

24. I believe, as no individual has a right to take his own life, on any supposed dissatisfaction, or deprive another of his species of existence, except in self defence; consequently no community can delegate a power

to their Representatives to do that, they themselves have not a right to do, either separately or collectively, only as above stated. *This may shew the necessity of proportioning punishments to crimes, and the utility of penitentiary houses.*

25. That no community can long enjoy tranquility, but by strict adherence to virtue, and frequent recourse to fundamental principles.

26. Lastly. That honesty, for ever was, and for ever will be the best policy.

III. Express my parting prayers, and ardent wishes, on various occasions.

I most heartily pray for, and wish the prosperity of the true Church of Jesus Christ, in general! That she may *keep the ordinances, as they were delivered to her at the first.*—That she may maintain a regular and gospel discipline.—That she may shortly experience a glorious revival, and numberless additions. And *arise and shake herself from the dust, and appear the beauty of the whole earth.*—I wish all false doctrines and heretical principles, may clearly be discovered, and sink into darkness, where they belong; and that “Heaven born truth,” may universally prevail.—I most ardently wish, that all those unhappy divisions, animosities, janglings, groundless criticisms, heart-burnings, evil-speaking, love of pre-eminence and persecution, which have for so many ages, torn and mangled the Church of Christ, may happily and entirely subside; that all affected distinctions and party names may be lost in oblivion, and that an *indissoluble union* may take place among all true Christians, upon the *old Apostolic plan*. I wish a blessing! on all *faithful, honest* Ministers of the Gospel, in these parts, and all other quarters. That they may be provided for, and supplied in every sense.—That they may be upheld, directed, and supported under all their difficulties and temptations, and be taught to walk regularly before the people, and to *feed the Church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood*. And that God would increase their number, as he shall see fit, making all *able Ministers of the New Testament, and examples to the flock.*—That all impostors, and heretical pretenders, to this sacred office, may have their mouths closed in everlasting silence; or rather experience a speedy and sound conversion.—I wish the churches may be blessed with diligent and faithful Deacons! That they, with the Churches, may perform their duties to their Ministers, in praying for them, strictly attending on their ministry, standing by them under trials, and lending a cheerful helping hand to them, in their temporal wants, that they may be at liberty to attend on their arduous work.

I wish well to Virginia, the land of my nativity!* I wish prosperity,

* The author was the son of *William Barrow*, of Brunswick county, who married *Amy Lee*, daughter of *William Lee*. David, was his second child, and eldest son, was

peace and liberty to all its inhabitants! I wish light and energy, to its Legislative, Executive and Judicial departments!—And a consistent, equitable, satisfactory reform in the several defective parts of its present government;—success to its *intended humane criminal code*, and *penitentiary house*;—and I wish a speedy revocation of all *tyrannical laws now in existence*.—I pray, and wish most ardently! *For the continuation of the Union, and for the restoration of the independence, and sovereignty of each of the States of America*.—I wish, and pray most heartily! That the present disturbances between America and France, may be amicably settled, and the causes thereof may be everlastingly removed; and peace and harmony be restored, honorable, advantageous and satisfactory to both Republics.

I wish the total extermination of all errors whatsoever, and the universal spread and prevalence of light and truth.—The downfall of all despots and despotism; and that the *great trump of Jubilee may be shortly sounded from pole to pole*; that all the oppressed, in all countries, may enjoy the sweets of liberty, and *every man*, of all complexions, *return to his inheritance*—I wish that all Judges, and Courts of Justice, may be enabled to maintain integrity, and exercise impartiality!—I wish success to what *few honest Lawyers* we have!—But the downfall, or rather the speedy reformation, of all pettyfoggers, and knavish characters in this office.—And that all officers, whether civil or military, may not content themselves with empty titles, but hold and exercise their offices, to their own honor, and the good of the community.

I wish that all masters, or owners of slaves, may consider how inconsistently they act, with a Republican Government, and whether in this particular, they are *doing, as they would others should do to them!*—I wish, most sincerely wish! That the poor, oppressed, naked, hunger bitten [] may have patience and fortitude to bear up under, an [] parts honestly to do and perform their duty, (or rather wh[at i]s exacted of them) to their oppressors, and constantly pray, and look forward by faith, to that desirable time, when they will be delivered from

born October the 30th, 1753: was bred to the business of farming: became acquainted with religion, as he hoped, in the 17th year of his age; joined the Baptist Church at about seventeen; began to improve a gift at about eighteen; married about the middle of the nineteenth year of his age, *Sarah Gilliam*, daughter of *Hinchey Gilliam*, of Sussex county, by whom he had twelve children, eight of whom are still living: their names are, *Nathan, Zibeth, Sarah, Abraham, William, Hinchey Gilliam, Amy Lee*, and *David Gilliam*.—At the call of a Church on Mill-Swamp, Isle-of-Wight county, he moved into that neighbourhood, January, 1774; was ordained a *Presbytery* to the work of the Ministry the following June, at which time he took the pastoral care of the Church, and has continued ever since to exercise his office among them, and neighbouring Churches, gathered under his Ministry.

the iron talons of their *task-masters*,* and joyfully put off the galling yoke of slavery—And by the way I wish, that all those who are so happy as to have been liberated, may behave themselves industriously, honestly and honorably to the cause of Liberty.

I wish Union, Happiness and Peace, to all married Pairs! and that they may *bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*. That the uprising generation may excel their Fore-fathers in Knowledge, Arts and Virtue.—I wish success to all honest Merchants and Traders, by land and sea—I wish well to the Rich, and that they may *not trust in uncertain riches*; but be charitable to the Needy, and use their treasures, *as good Stewards of the manifold Grace of God*, that those blessings may not prove a curse to them in the end.

I pity the poor and afflicted from the very depths of my hearth, and most earnestly pray! That they may have patience, succour, and needful supplies, under all their sufferings and tribulations and a timely and happy issue, out of all their afflictions.

I wish that our Physicians in general, were more skillful and attentive; and when called upon to visit the Poor and Needy in their affliction would be more reasonable in their charges, which would [be] greatly to their Honor and Profit.

I wish th[at the good] Lord! may reward all my kind Friends and Benefactors, *f[our-f]old*, for every favour they have done me; and forgive all my enemies, if I have any.

I feel tenderly concerned for the Wicked in general, and most heartily pray! that all Lyars, perjured Persons, Drunkards, Thieves, profane Swearers, Gamblers, Knaves, Oppressors of the Poor, Whore-mongers, and Adulterers, &c. may speedily refo[rm], and experience a sound conversion.

Finally. I wish! all my Readers, and Acquaintance, Friends and Foes, far and near—an encrease of *Corn*, and *Wine*, and *Oil*; or in other terms, "Virtue, Health, and Dollars;" with *Hearts* to improve those *blessings* to the *Glory* of our common *Benefactor*—but more *especially*, an *increase* of that *Grace*, that *reigns through Righteousness, to eternal Life, by Jesus Christ*.

I am, the Publics sincere Friend,

And unworthy Servant,

DAVID BARROW.

* In all probability some readers may be rather offended at some remarks and expressions in this letter, concerning slavery: especially those who are inclined to be merciful, and somewhat tender to their slaves; but such ought to consider, that however gentle they may be towards them, the nature of their situation is such, that they are daily liable to fall into worse hands; for who can tell what sort of feelings his heirs and successors will possess? So that if we view the subject with all the horrors attending it, it is impossible for language to dress it in colours too dark.