Lesson 2

Colonial Period
(mid-1600s-1765)

Christianity was central in the planting of the first American colonies—Virginia, Maryland, and those in New England. This influence continued in the establishment of all thirteen colonies and was evident in their founding charters and laws. There were at least 128 different covenants, compacts, charters, and constitutions written during the colonization period of America—at least 86 constitution-like documents were written in the colonies before 1722 and at least 42 constitution-like documents written in England for the colonists before 1735. These were the foundational civil documents of the original thirteen colonies, and hence of the states which comprised the United States of America. The Christian element is central and evident in almost all of these. Some were examined in Lesson 1; others are presented below.

Pennsylvania

When Quaker minister William Penn was given the land between New York and Maryland in 1681 he said, “my God that has given it to me…will, I believe, bless and make it the seed of a nation.” In 1682, the Great Law of Pennsylvania was enacted revealing the desire of Penn and the inhabitants of the colony to establish “laws as shall best preserve true Christian and civil liberty, in opposition to all unchristian, licentious, and unjust practices, (whereby God may have his due, Caesar his due, and the people their due).”

Thomas Jefferson called Penn “the greatest law-giver the world has produced.” Penn, whose wisdom was “derived from that book of Gospel statutes,” recognized Christian character as the basis of good government. He states in the Frame of Government of Pennsylvania:

Governments like clocks, go from the motion men give them; and as governments are made and moved by men, so by them they are ruined too. Wherefore governments rather depend upon men, than men upon governments….Let men be good, and the government cannot be bad; if it be ill, they will cure it.

At a later time William Penn told the Russian Czar, Peter the Great, that “if thou wouldst rule well, thou must rule for God, and to do that, thou must be ruled by Him.”

Penn’s Biblical philosophy of government was evident in the Frame of Government writing:

When the great and wise God had made the world, of all His creatures, it pleased Him to choose man his Deputy to rule it; and to fit Him for so great a charge and trust, He did not only qualify him with skill and power, but with integrity to use them justly.
Penn then presents the Biblical purpose of law and theory of government, quoting from the book of Romans and other Scriptures. He states “that government seems to me a part of religion itself, a thing sacred in its institution and end. For, if it does not directly remove the cause, it crushes the effects of evil, and is as such, (though a lower, yet) an emanation of the same Divine Power, that is both Author and Object of pure religion.”

This charter, as was similar in the other colonies, officially recognized “the Lord’s Day,” the Sabbath, where business was deferred till the next day. The various laws presented in the charter were Biblical in their origin. Everyone who served in government, elected and appointed, “and all that have right to elect such Members, shall be such as possess faith in Jesus Christ.” Thus, only Christians could hold office and vote. This was true in other colonies as well.

Section one of the Pennsylvania Charter of Privileges (1701) contains qualifications of officers where “all persons who also profess to believe in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, shall be capable (notwithstanding their other persuasions and practices in point of conscience and religion) to serve this government in any capacity, both legislatively and executively.”

Georgia Colonists
Georgia was the last of the original thirteen colonies. Dr. Thomas Bray and General James Oglethorpe teamed up in 1731 to establish a colony “for instructing the Negroes and the poor of this kingdom (England’s imprisoned debtor and unemployed), and for other good purposes.”

The original 100 settlers were followed by Moravians and other persecuted Protestants in 1736 who, when they touched shore, kneeled in thanks to God. They said, “Our end in leaving our native country is not to gain riches and honor, but singly this–to live wholly to the glory of God.” The object of the devout Oglethorpe and others was “to make Georgia a religious colony” and so they laid out Savannah with numerous religious ceremonies and invited John and Charles Wesley and Rev. George Whitefield over to serve as chaplains, oversee Indian affairs, and build orphanages. When Whitefield died, the legislature attempted to have him buried there at public cost in honor of his influence.

Whitefield not only influenced Georgia, but all the colonies. His primary role in sparking the First Great Awakening was foundational in preparing Americans in character and worldview necessary for the support of the American Revolution and independence.
Christian Nature of Colonial Documents

New York

- A Letter from Governor Richard Nicolls to the Inhabitants of Long Island, February 1665—In his letter establishing a legislature for New York, Governor Nicolls recommended the people choose rulers with Godly characteristics, the result of which would be “the propagation of true Religion amongst us.”[1]
- Charter of Liberties and Privileges, October 30, 1683—“No person or persons which profess faith in God by Jesus Christ shall at any time be any ways molested punished disquieted or called in question for difference in opinion.”[2] In New York, Christian ministers were supported by public monies, which was true in many other colonies as well.

New Jersey

- Fundamentals of West New Jersey, 1681—“Forasmuch as it hath pleased God, to bring us into this Province…that we may be a people to the praise and honor of His name, Who hath so dealt with us, and for the good and welfare of our posterity to come.”[3]

North Carolina

- The Fundamental Constitutions, 1669—“No man shall be permitted to be a freeman of Carolina or to have any estate or habitation within it that doth not acknowledge a God; and that God is publicly and solemnly to be worshipped.” While the Church of England was recognized as the official church, religious freedom was acknowledged for others: “that Jews, heathens, and other dissenters from the purity of Christian religion may not be scared and kept at a distance from it;…and all those convincing methods of gentleness and meekness suitable to the rules and design of the Gospel, be won ever to embrace and unfeignedly receive the truth.”[4]

South Carolina

- The Fundamental Constitutions (see above) written by John Locke and Anthony Cooper governed the province of Carolina, which later divided into North and South Carolina. An Act to Ascertain the Manner and Form of Electing Members to Represent the Province, 1721, one qualification for voting or holding public office was “professing the Christian religion.”[5] Officials “shall take the following oath on the Holy Evangelists. I, AB, so sincerely swear that I am duly qualified to be chosen and serve…So help me God.”[6]

Georgia

- Act to Ascertain the Manner and Form of Electing Members to Represent the Inhabitants of This Province in the Commons House of Assembly, June 9, 1761—“Professing the Christian religion and no other” was one qualification for holding elected office.[7]

2. Ibid., p. 260.
3. Ibid., p. 263.
6. Ibid., p. 354.
7. Ibid., p. 361.
First Great Awakening
While the early settlers of America were primarily Christians, many with a great zeal for God, the leaders of the First Great Awakening believed each generation must obey God’s Word and keep the internal flame of truth lit. By the time of the founding of the thirteenth original colony (Georgia, 1733), America at large, according to one writer, experienced a lull in religion. Jonathan Edwards described his town as experiencing a “degenerate time” with “dullness of religion.”\(^\text{13}\) Future chaplain of the Congress Rev. Samuel Blair of Pennsylvania stated, “Religion lay as it were dying, and ready to expire its last breath of life in this part of the visible church.”\(^\text{14}\) The life of God had departed from many people and churches. God in His mercy, and in accordance with His plans in history, would bring a revival—a great awakening that not only impacted America, but many other nations.

A great outpouring of God’s Spirit occurred through Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Samuel Davies, and others, that united and set the colonies aflame. Benjamin Franklin, who became friends with Whitefield and often heard him preach, records in his autobiography in 1739 the great impact the revival had:

> It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.\(^\text{15}\)

Whitefield traveled up and down the colonies drawing huge crowds wherever he preached, whether in churches, streets, or fields. It is estimated that eighty percent of all Americans heard him speak.\(^\text{16}\) Myriads of thousands of people were converted and churches were filled. Godliness swept through the colonies. Theological truths, including much new light, were transmitted to the families through the churches.

The ideas that came forth during the First Great Awakening not only addressed personal matters, but all areas of life. America’s unique understanding of religious and civil liberty for all men blossomed during this awakening. The titles of sermons preached and printed during this time reveal that the Biblical truth being recovered provided a blueprint for building a nation. A few of those sermons were:

- The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants (1744), Elisha Williams
- Civil Magistrates Must Be Just, Ruling in the Fear of God (1747), Charles Chauncey
- Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers (1750), Jonathan Mayhew
- Religion and Patriotism, the Constituents of a Good Soldier (1755)
- The Advice of Joab to the Host of Israel Going Forth to War (1759), Thaddeus Maccarty
- Thanksgiving Sermon on the Repeal of the Stamp Act (1766), Charles Chauncey
- Election Sermon: Civil Government is for the Good of the People—the Character of Good Rulers, and the Duties of Citizens (1770), Samuel Cooke
- An Oration upon the Beauties of Liberty (1773), John Allen
- Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers (1774), Samuel Sherwood
• Thanksgiving Sermon: The Christian Duty of Resistance to Tyrants–Prepare for War–Appeal to Heaven (1774), William Gordon
• Election Sermon: The Right of Self-Government is from God–the Divine Right of Kings Exploded (1775), Samuel Langdon
• The Bible and the Sword (1776), John Fletcher

To transmit the theological, governmental, legal, economic, and general worldview coming forth from the Awakening, a number of new colleges and universities were established, mostly by various churches, including the College of New Jersey (Princeton, 1746), King’s College (Columbia, 1754), Brown (1764), Rutgers (1764), Dartmouth (1770), and Hampden-Sidney (1776). The colonists understood a knowledgeable clergy and citizenry are essential to liberty.

In short, there would have been no American Revolution (1760-90) without the First Great Awakening (1735-70). The Founding Fathers, who gave us the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, were young men during the Awakening. This revival shaped their faith, character, and worldview, preparing them to give birth to an exceptional nation, what they considered to be the first Christian constitutional republic in history. It also gave the American people at large the qualities necessary to live in liberty—including self-government, morality, Biblical worldview, regard for life, and a fear of God.

The Role of the Church and Clergy in the Cultivation of Liberty

A statement by historian David Gregg describes well the role of the church in the early American republic: “The people made the laws, and the churches made the people.” The church as an ecclesiastical body did not directly hold power nor make civil law. The church influenced government by the power of its teachings.

This role was described by a French political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, who came to the United States of America in the 1830’s in search of her greatness. After a thorough examination he communicated in his book, Democracy in America:

On my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things.

In other words, de Tocqueville said that our civil government will not work without the people being virtuous, which is the product of the religious influence of the church.
Ministers were involved in every aspect of the public affairs of America. They colonized and formed many of our states, they wrote our laws and constitutions, they served as judges and lawyers, they established schools and universities, and they participated directly in civil government.

The colonists considered that the greatest and most dreaded curse was for them to someday have impotent preachers who through ignorance of God’s Word did not know how to make it relevant to any situation. In their thinking, this was the primary cause of the religious and civil tyranny of the Dark Ages.

**Pastors in Public Affairs in the 1600’s**

Clergymen in colonial America not only impacted personal lives but also public affairs. Some of those impacting politics in the seventeenth century include:

- 1620–John Robinson shaping the Mayflower Compact.
- 1636–Roger Williams and John Clarke founding the state of Rhode Island.
- 1639–Thomas Hooker and John Davenport founding the state of Connecticut and writing the first Constitution.
- 1641–Nathaniel Ward writing the Massachusetts Body of Liberties.
- 1681–William Penn founding Pennsylvania and writing its Frame of Government.

The influence of ministers continued throughout the seventeenth century. John Wingate Thornton summarized the role of the clergy in the birth of our nation: “To the pulpit, the Puritan pulpit, we owe the moral force which won our independence.”20 As the primary educators of the colonial period, the clergy had a tremendous impact upon the character and thinking of the people. Professor Harry S. Stout of Yale University writes: “The average weekly churchgoer in New England (and there were far more churchgoers than church members) listened to something like seven thousand sermons in a lifetime, totaling somewhere around fifteen thousand hours of concentrated listening.” These statistics become even more significant when one considers there were essentially no “competing public speakers offering alternative messages. For all intents and purposes, the sermon was the only regular voice of authority.”21

Ministers were the primary educators not only at churches but also at schools, academies, and colleges. Many of the Founding Fathers were tutored by ministers, including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Mason, Patrick Henry, and Noah Webster. Those who attended college would have been trained by ministers as well. Through their Biblical teaching, pastors guided the American people through their struggle for independence and freedom. A few of the more influential clergymen include:

**John Wise, Father of American Independence**

Rev. John Wise has been called a “Father of American Independence” due to the influence of his book *The Law of Nature in Government*. First written in 1717, the Founders considered its ideas of liberty so valuable that they reprinted it in 1772,22 and helped distribute it among the people. Sections of this work appear word for word in the Declaration of Independence.
Elisha Williams, Militant Clergyman

Elisha Williams was a significant force during the First Great Awakening. He served as a schoolteacher, a state representative, president of Yale University, a judge, and an ambassador. He was a disciple of George Whitefield’s and became chaplain of the New England forces in the French and Indian War. In 1746, Williams became a colonel and led troops in the field. In 1744, Elisha Williams wrote a 66-page pamphlet, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*, which contained a clear and full explanation of the principles of equality, liberty, and property. These ideas were influential in preparing people for the Revolution a few decades later.

Samuel Davies, Ambassador from the South

Rev. Samuel Davies was a bold ambassador for Christ. In his desire to see the Kingdom of God come on earth as it is in heaven he served not only as a pastor but also as a lawyer, an ambassador to England, and president of Princeton College. Historian E.L. Magoon writes:

> [H]e had made himself a thorough master of English law, civil and ecclesiastical, and always chose to meet every persecuting indictment in the highest courts with his own plea…[H]e went to England and obtained the explicit sanction of the highest authority with respect to the extension of the Toleration law to Virginia. It was during this mission that…George II and many of his court were in the congregation of this American Dissenter. His majesty, struck with admiration, or forgetting the proprieties of the occasion, spoke several times to those around him and smiled. Davies paused a moment, and then looking sternly at the king, exclaimed, “When the lion roars, the beasts of the forest all tremble; and when King Jesus speaks, the princes of earth should keep silence.”

Davies, one of the greatest orators in colonial America, served as the mentor for the man Jefferson called “the greatest orator that ever lived”—Patrick Henry. When Patrick was around twelve years old, his mother joined the church where Samuel Davies preached. Mrs. Henry would attend regularly and always take Patrick, who from the first showed a high appreciation for the preacher. Each Sunday as they rode home in their buggy, Mrs. Henry and Patrick would review the sermon. This greatly influenced Patrick and the development of his oratorical skills. Patrick even declared that Davies was “the greatest orator he ever heard.” But Patrick Henry also learned from Davies a sound Biblical theology. William Wirt Henry writes: “His early example of eloquence…was Mr. Davies, and the effect of his teaching upon his after life may be plainly traced.”

Jonathan Mayhew, “Father of Civil Liberty”

Rev. Jonathan Mayhew has been called the Father of Civil Liberty in America for several reasons. He was the first clergyman to begin preaching resistance to England’s tyranny in 1750. In his *Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission* he said, “Although there be a sense…in which Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, His inspired apostles have, nevertheless, laid down some general principles concerning the office of civil rulers and the duty of subjects…It is the duty of all Christian people to inform themselves what it is which their religion teaches concerning that subjection which they owe to the Higher Powers.”

After the passage of the Stamp Act, Mayhew became even more influential. Historian B.F. Morris wrote:

> Whoever repeats the story of the Revolution will rehearse the fame of Mayhew. He spent whole nights in prayer for the dangers of this country. Light dawned on his mind on a Sabbath morning of July, 1766, and he wrote to Otis saying, ‘You have heard of the communion [i.e. unity] of the churches; while I was thinking of this…[the] importance of the communion of the colonies appeared to me in a striking light. Would it not be decorous in our Assembly to send circulars to
all the rest (of the colonies) expressing a desire to cement a union among ourselves?...It may be the only means of perpetuating our liberties.’ ‘This suggestion,’ said Bancroft, ‘of a more perfect union for the common defense, originating with Mayhew, was the first public expression of the future Union which has been the glory of the American republic; and it came from a clergyman, on a Sabbath morning, under the inspiration of Heaven.”

**Rev. John Witherspoon, Signer of the Declaration of Independence**

Rev. John Witherspoon typified the colonial clergy in that he literally fulfilled Christ’s command to disciple the nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Witherspoon moved from Scotland to America in 1768 to become president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). He was elected to Congress, signed the Declaration of Independence, and served on over 100 committees during our struggle for independence.

He is said to have had more influence on the monetary policies found in the Constitution than any other man.

Through his role as an educator, John Witherspoon shaped the men who shaped America. During his tenure as president of the College of New Jersey, there were 478 graduates of what became Princeton University. Of these, at least 86 became active in civil government and included: one president (James Madison), one vice-president (Aaron Burr), 10 cabinet officers, 21 senators, 39 congressmen, 12 governors, a Supreme Court justice (Brockholst Livingston), and one attorney general of the United States (William Bradford). Nearly one-fifth of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, one-sixth of the delegates of the Constitutional Convention, and one-fifth of the first Congress under the Constitution were graduates of the College of New Jersey.28

The following is an excerpt from a sermon entitled “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” that Witherspoon preached on May 17, 1776, in observance of a Day of Fasting and Prayer called for by Congress:

> Upon the whole, I beseech you to make a wise improvement of the present threatening aspect of public affairs, and to remember that your duty to God, to your country, to your families, and to yourselves, is the same. True religion is nothing else but an inward temper and outward conduct suited to your state and circumstance in Providence at any time. And as peace with God and conformity to Him, adds to the sweetness of created comforts while we possess them, so in times of difficulty and trial, it is in the man of piety and inward principle, that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier. God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.”

**Abraham Baldwin and Hugh Williamson, Delegates at the Constitutional Convention**

Rev. Abraham Baldwin was a lawyer, a chaplain in the war, a member of the Georgia legislature, and a member of the Continental Congress before becoming Georgia’s delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Afterwards he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate and also founded the University of Georgia. Hugh Williamson was another minister (licensed preacher of the Presbyterian Church) who was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.
Other significant clergy-statesmen

Baptist ministers Isaac Backus and John Leland were lobbyists for religious freedom in the 1780s. Manassas Cutler was the author of the Northwest Ordinance, written in 1787. Approximately 50 clergy were part of the state ratifying conventions (1787-1789). William Provost was appointed the first Chaplain to the United States Congress in 1789. In that same year Rev. Frederick A. C. Muhlenberg was elected the first Speaker of the United States House of Representatives. The number of clergy who held public office in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was large. 30

Ministers continued to be engaged in civil affairs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and do so today. Many clergy, such as Charles Finney, led the fight against slavery. Lyman Beecher, D.L. Moody, and Billy Sunday stood against alcohol abuse and for women’s rights. Others helped to build hospitals and provide leadership for various charitable organizations such as the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. U.S. President James Garfield was a lay preacher before seeking public office. In more recent times, Martin Luther King Jr. worked to end discrimination, and Jerry Falwell fought against abortion and pornography. A number of ministers have served in civil government.

How the Clergy Taught Principles of Liberty

While schools were established to train new generations in a Biblical worldview, the clergy continually clarified and applied that worldview to relevant issues of their day. For 150 years leading up to the Revolution, the colonial pastors used every opportunity possible to educate the people in the principles of liberty. Various means included:

1. The Weekday Lecture—Many churches offered regular training in Biblical worldview. The most famous weekday class was held on Thursday in Boston, and was copied by pastors in many colonies. Historian Jonathan Trumbull wrote that the clergy “were the principal instructors of those who received an education for public life. For many years they were consulted by the legislature in all affairs of importance, civil or religious. They were appointed on committees with the Governor and magistrates to assist them in the most delicate concerns of the Commonwealth….So influential and authoritative were their teachings, that it is said of one of the Puritan ministers, John Cotton, ‘That what he preached on the Lord’s day was followed by the synod, and that what he preached in the Thursday Lecture was followed by the General Court [the legislature].’” 31

2. The Election Sermon—An annual event begun in 1633 in Massachusetts, where a minister was invited to deliver a message to the newly elected government leaders. Election Sermons were often printed and widely read. They became the political textbooks of the time. John Wingate Thornton writes of the Election Sermons and the clergy’s influence in early America:

   The clergy were generally consulted by the civil authorities; and not infrequently the suggestions from the pulpit, on election days and other special occasions, were enacted into laws. The statute-book, the reflex of the age, shows this influence. The State was developed out of the Church. 32

   The sermon is styled the Election Sermon, and is printed. Every representative has a copy for himself, and generally one or more for the minister or ministers of his town. As the patriots have prevailed, the preachers of each sermon have been the zealous friends of liberty; and the passages most adapted to
promote the spread and love of it have been selected and circulated far and wide by means of
newspapers, and read with avidity and a degree of veneration on account of the preacher and his
election to the service of the day.\(^\text{33}\)

These election sermons were preached in America for about 250 years (into the 1870’s).

3. The Artillery Sermon—These were periodic addresses given to the military on such topics as
“Defensive War in a Just Cause Sinless” and the sin of cowardice.

4. Special Fast, Thanksgiving, and Anniversary Sermons—These sermons were preached in observance
of victories, calamities, and special events.

5. Execution Sermons—Ministers would often address the community before executions were carried out
for capital crimes. In these Execution Sermons the guilty party might be called to repentance and citizens
were warned of the consequences for criminal behavior.

The American Political Science Review in 1984 showed that 10% of all political writings in the founding
era were sermons, and asserted therefore that colonial clergymen must be considered part of our
“Founding Fathers” in America.\(^\text{34}\)

To restate Professor Stout’s statistic (see above), during an adult’s lifetime in colonial America, the
average adult listened to about 15,000 hours of Biblical exposition by the clergy. Their influence on
public opinion was equivalent to what is held today by the modern media.

**Education**

As was true for the educational institutions started in the first years of colonization, those begun in the
following centuries were primarily Christian. One hundred and six of the first 108 colleges were started
by and for the Christian faith. By the close of 1860, there were 246 colleges in America. Seventeen of
these were state institutions; almost every other one was founded by Christian denominations or by
individuals who avowed a religious purpose.\(^\text{35}\) Many of the state colleges were Christian as well. The first
college, Harvard, was mentioned in Lesson 1. A few other early colleges include:

**William and Mary, 1691**

The College of William and Mary was started mainly due to the efforts of Rev. James Blair in order,
according to its charter of 1691, “that the Church of Virginia may be furnished with a seminary of
ministers of the Gospel, and that the youth may be piously educated in good letters and manners, and that
the Christian religion may be propagated
among the Western Indians to the glory of
Almighty God.”\(^\text{36}\)

**Yale University, 1701**

Yale University was started by Congregational
ministers in 1701, “for the liberal and religious
education of suitable youth…to propagate in
this wilderness, the blessed reformed Protestant
religion.”\(^\text{37}\)
Princeton, 1746
A product of the Great Awakening, Princeton was founded by the Presbyterians in 1746. Rev. Jonathan Dickinson became its first president, declaring, “Cursed be all that learning that is contrary to the cross of Christ.” To help raise funds for the college in England, a General Account was prepared that stated:

[T]he two principal objects the trustees had in view, were Science and Religion. Their first concern was to cultivate the minds of the pupils, in all those branches of erudition, which are generally taught in the universities abroad; and to perfect their design, their next care was to rectify the heart, by inculcating the great precepts of Christianity, in order to make them good men.

University of Pennsylvania, 1751
Ben Franklin had much to do with the beginning of the University of Pennsylvania. It was not started by a denomination, but its laws reflect its Christian character. Consider the first two Laws, relating to the Moral Conduct, and Orderly Behaviour, of the Students and Scholars of the University of Pennsylvania (from1801):

1. None of the students or scholars, belonging to this seminary, shall make use of any indecent or immoral language: whether it consist in immodest expressions; in cursing and swearing; or in exclamations which introduce the name of GOD, without reverence, and without necessity.

2. None of them shall, without a good and sufficient reason, be absent from school, or late in his attendance; more particularly at the time of prayers, and of the reading of the Holy Scriptures.

Columbia, 1754
In 1754, Samuel Johnson became the first president of Columbia (called King’s College up until 1784). In that year he composed an advertisement announcing the opening of the college. It stated:

The chief thing that is aimed at in this college is, to teach and engage the children to know God in Jesus Christ, and to love and serve him, in all sobriety, godliness and righteousness of life, with a perfect heart, and a willing mind; and to train them up in all virtuous habits, and all such useful knowledge as may render them creditable to their families and friends.

Dartmouth, 1770
Congregational pastor Eleazar Wheelock (1711-79) secured a charter from the governor of New Hampshire in March, 1770, to establish a college to train young men for missionary service among the Indians. The college was named after Lord Dartmouth of England who assisted in raising funds for its establishment. Its Latin motto means, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” The first students met in a log cabin, and when weather permitted Dr. Wheelock held morning and evening prayers in the open air.

Some other colleges started before America’s Independence include: Brown, started by the Baptists in 1764; Rutgers, 1766, by the Dutch Reformed Church; Washington and Lee, 1749; and Hampden-Sidney, 1776, by the Presbyterians.

Textbooks Were Biblical
The Bible and its principles were the focal point of education for the first few centuries of America’s history. In addition to their founding charters and laws, the textbooks used in schools affirm this. In 1690, John Locke said that children learned to read by following “the ordinary road of Hornbook, Primer,
The New Haven Code of 1655 required that children be made “able duly to read the Scriptures…and in some competent measure to understand the main grounds and principles of Christian Religion necessary to salvation.”

John Adams reflected the view of the Founders in regard to the place of the Bible in society when he wrote:

Suppose a nation in some distant region, should take the Bible for their only law-book, and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited!...What a utopia; what a paradise would this region be?

Hornbooks

Hornbooks had been used to teach children to read from as far back as 1400 in Europe. They came to America with the colonists and were common from the 1500s-1700s. A hornbook was a flat piece of wood with a handle, upon which a sheet of printed paper was attached and covered with transparent animal horn to protect it. A typical hornbook had the alphabet, the vowels, a list of syllables, the invocation of the Trinity, and the Lord’s Prayer. Some had a pictured alphabet.

Catechisms

Catechisms were used extensively in early education in America. There were over 500 different catechisms according to Increase Mather. The most widely used catechism was one which the Puritans brought with them from England, The Foundation of Christian Religion gathered into Six Principles, by William Perkins. Later, the Westminster Catechism became the most prominent one.

The New England Primer

The most widely used textbook of the eighteenth century was the New England Primer. It was first published in Boston around 1690 by a devout protestant Benjamin Harris and was frequently reprinted through the 1800s. It sold millions* of copies in 150 years. Most of the Founding Fathers (those who gave us the Declaration and Constitution) would have used the New England Primer during their education, whether at home or school. The rhyming alphabet is its most characteristic feature. From a 1777 Primer, the alphabet was taught with this rhyme:

A In Adam’s Fall
   We sinned all.
B Heaven to find
   The Bible Mind.
C Christ crucified
   For sinners died.
D The Deluge drowned
   The Earth around.
E Elijah hid
   By Ravens fed.
F The judgment made
   Felix afraid.
G As runs the Glass,
   Our Life doth pass
H My Book and Heart

* Depending on the source, estimates range from 3-8 million.

The New England Primer taught the alphabet with a clear Biblical message.
Must never part….

It is easy to see its Christian character. The Primer underwent various modifications over the years.

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1 See Donald S. Lutz, “From Covenant to Constitution in American Political Thought,” *Publius*, Fall 1980, pp. 101-133.
3 Ibid., pp. 85-86.
7 Ibid., p. 216.
8 Ibid., p. 220.
9 *Sources of Our Liberties*, p. 256.
21 See Thornton, p. xxix.
24 Ibid., p. 16.
31 Mark Beliles and Stephen McDowell, *America’s Providential History*, p. 121. [need to find original source]
32 Thornton, pp. xxii-xxiii.
33 Thornton, p. xxvi.
37 B.F. Morris, p. 239.
39 *The Pageant of America*, p.306.
40 Ibid., p. 307.
41 Ibid., p. 309.
42 Ibid., p. 312.
43 Ibid., p. 258.
44 Ibid.
47 *The New England Primer, Improved for the more easy attaining the true reading of English, To which is added the Assembly of Divines, and Mr. Cotton’s Catechism*, Boston: Printed by Edward Draper, 1777, reprinted by WallBuilder Press, 1991.