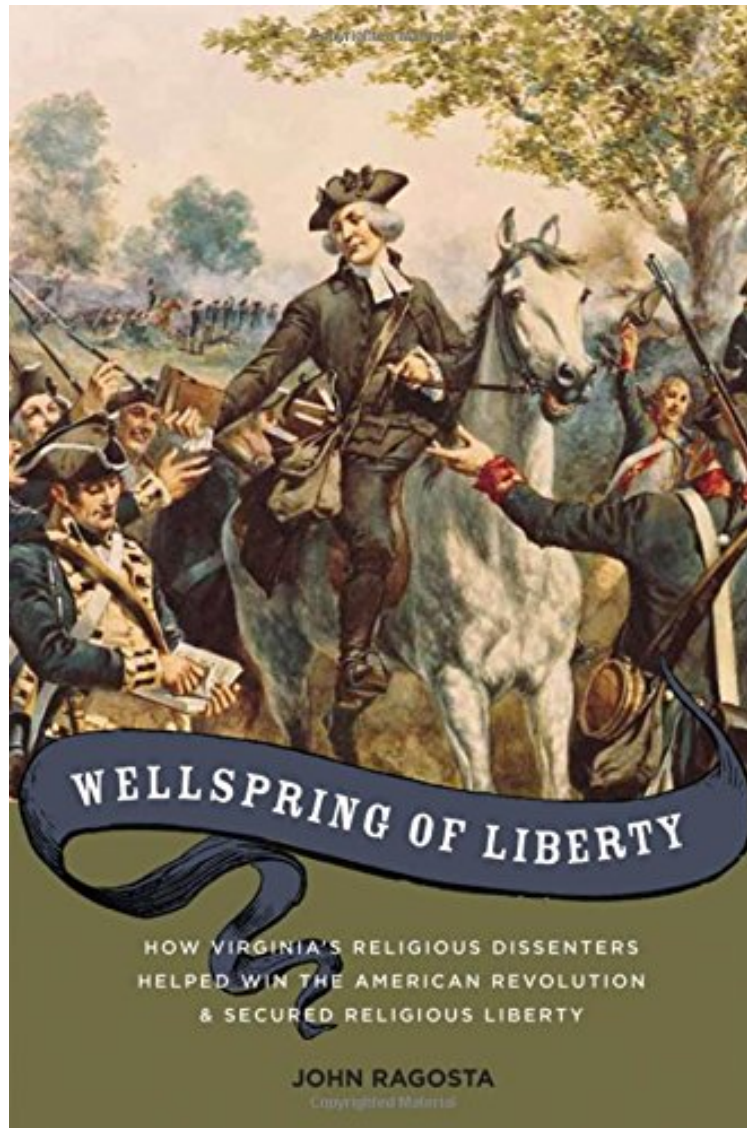


(Free) Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty

## Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty

*John A. Ragosta*

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**John A. Ragosta : Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American

## Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty:

14 of 14 people found the following review helpful. *Wellspring of Liberty - An Excellent Survey of VA's Journey to Separation of Church and State* By Dr. Bruce T. Gourley John A. Ragosta offers a valuable contribution to the story of America's transition from a collection of largely theocratic colonies to a nation founded upon religious liberty and separation of church and state. Focusing on Virginia in the 1770s and 1780s, Ragosta mines the data and documentary evidence from political leaders, establishment church preachers, and dissenters (Baptists and Presbyterians) pertaining to the fight for religious liberty and separation of church and state in Virginia. Virginia's political leaders in turn (including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington and Patrick Henry) utilized the Virginia model, encapsulated in Thomas Jefferson's 1786 Virginia Act For Establishing Religious Freedom, in successfully campaigning for religious liberty and separation of church and state at the federal level, enshrined in 1791 in the First Amendment. Thus, Virginia is pivotal to understanding why America was founded as a secular nation upon the principles of religious liberty and separation of church and state, and Ragosta systematically dispels contemporary evangelical mythologies that posit America's founding as a Christian nation. More to the point, however, Ragosta's work examines the manner in which minority, persecuted, Christian dissenters in Virginia transitioned from a position of powerless within a theocratic colony (the established church was Anglican) in the early 1770s, to successfully dethroning Virginia's theocracy by the late 1780s. In Ragosta's narrative, Virginia's need for rifles in the revolution against Great Britain provided an opening for dissenters to emerge from prisons and disenfranchisement and engage political processes. Despite efforts by the establishment church to harness the newfound political muscle of suddenly-important dissenters, dissenter demands for religious liberty and separation of church and state, upon entering into serious political discourse, persevered. When establishment church leaders in the immediate post-war years tried to squash the momentum of dissenters' agenda, Madison and Jefferson sided with Baptists and many Presbyterians. Collectively, dissenters and political opponents of state religion snatched victory from the clutches of the establishment church and altered the course of American history. Ragosta's thesis, in short, counters the argument that the Great Awakening, focusing on individualism and challenging the prevailing social order, made inevitable the demise of Virginia's establishment church. To the contrary, the Revolutionary War set in motion a chain of events that empowered dissenters and defeated the establishment, Ragosta asserts. In addition to offering a compelling, well-documented narrative of dissenters' path to power, the author sheds light on the contemporary public discourse concerning the role of religion in the founding years of the American nation. This volume is a valuable addition to the shelves of historians, theologians, and the general public.-----Dr. Bruce T. Gourley Executive Director Baptist History Heritage Society[...]

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Reading the book is a real chore By Historian This is a dissertation turned into a book, with all the positives and negatives associated with such a beast. On the plus side, the info is interesting, and is a good analysis of the situation in VA during (and just before) the Revolution among dissenting churches (Baptists and Presby., some Methodists). Author shows that these sects took advantage of the war years to extract relig. liberties from state Patriots/Anglicans. The problem is that reading the book is a real chore. Ragosta simply cannot write in an engaging style--his prose is wooden, sentences are too long and poorly crafted, and sadly, just plain dull. His OUP editors should be partially blamed here for such a dry narrative. Moreover, possibly due to his legal history background, he leaves out all the good human interest details and sticks the stories in an appendix! What a missed opportunity to have created an engaging, dramatic story for all readers.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Phantom Excellent new insights into the role of religious freedom in the founding of our country.

Before the American Revolution, no colony more assiduously protected its established church or more severely persecuted religious dissenters than Virginia. Both its politics and religion were dominated by an Anglican establishment, and dissenters from the established Church of England were subject to numerous legal infirmities and serious persecution. By 1786, no state more fully protected religious freedom. This profound transformation, as John A. Ragosta shows in this book, arose not from a new-found cultural tolerance. Rather, as the Revolution approached, Virginia's political establishment needed the support of the religious dissenters, primarily Presbyterians and Baptists, for the mobilization effort. Dissenters seized this opportunity to insist on freedom of religion in return for their mobilization. Their demands led to a complex and extended negotiation in which the religious establishment slowly and grudgingly offered just enough reforms to maintain the crucial support of the dissenters. After the war, when dissenters' support was no longer needed, the establishment leaders sought to recapture control, but found they had seriously miscalculated: wartime negotiations had politicized the dissenters. As a result dissenters' demands for the separation of church and state triumphed over the establishment's efforts and Jefferson's Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom was adopted. Historians and the Supreme Court have repeatedly noted that the foundation of the First Amendment's protection of religious liberty lies in Virginia's struggle, turning primarily to Jefferson and Madison to understand this. In *Wellspring of Liberty*, John A. Ragosta argues that Virginia's religious dissenters played a seminal, and previously underappreciated, role in the development of the First Amendment and in the meaning of

religious freedom as we understand it today.

"Focused, persuasive, and meticulously researched .Helps us to more precisely understand the true implications of the Great Awakening as well as the threat of establishing an Anglican bishop as catalysts to American independence."--Episcopal History"A timely and useful book. Ragosta's insistence on the agency of dissenters is refreshing and timely. This book makes a worthy contribution to the ongoing study of religious freedom in the United States."--Church History"Relying on an impressive array of court records, letters, diaries, newspapers, sermons, denominational histories, and, most importantly, hundreds of petitions sent to the Virginia legislature...Ragosta leaves no doubt that dissenters were key players in Virginia's transformation from an Anglican stronghold to a bellwether of religious freedom. An innovative and important book that sheds new light on Revolutionary loyalty, military mobilization in Virginia, and the origins of religious liberty in America."--American Journal of Legal History"This engaging, revisionist study reveals in new detail the contribution of dissenters-especially Baptists and Presbyterians-to the triumph of religious freedom in late-eighteenth-century Virginia. First bartering their support of the Revolution for greater toleration, the newly politicized dissenters turned after the war to public meetings and vast petitioning campaigns to push for the complete separation of church from state finally delivered in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. No one has examined this story with a sharper eye than John Ragosta."--Patricia U. Bonomi, New York University"Combining wonderful research with significant insights into Revolutionary-era America, John Ragosta adds new support for the assertions that religious establishment, in any of its forms, resulted in extensive persecution of dissenters and that the process of disestablishment was extremely contentious. Ragosta's work will likely become required reading for scholars in the history of the separation of church and state."--Mark D. McGarvie, author of *One Nation Under Law: America's Early National Struggles to Separate Church and State*"Wellspring of Liberty is a detailed and important study of how Virginia's religious dissenters demanded religious concessions in exchange for their support of the American Revolution, and it outlines the piecemeal, incremental nature of wartime and post-war religious reforms. This study significantly attributes much of the republicanization of Virginia to the dissenters who successfully negotiated, in a forced dialogue with establishment leaders, for disestablishment and religious freedom. Ragosta convincingly finds that the Revolutionary War was the wellspring of both republicanization and religious liberty."--Nancy L. Rhoden, The University of Western Ontario"In addition to offering a compelling, well-documented narrative of dissenters' path to power, the author sheds light on the contemporary public discourse concerning the role of religion in the founding years of the American nation. This volume is a valuable addition to the shelves of historians, theologians, and the general public."--Baptist Studies Bulletin"The great appeal of Ragosta's book lies in its ability to increase our understanding of the ideological genealogy of religious freedom...[It] presents an interesting and detailed portrait of the politicization of Virginia's religious dissenters that will undoubtedly be useful for students of Virginia's religious history."--Virginia Magazine of History and Biography"Ragosta makes a valuable contribution to the field by showing how religious disestablishment in Virginia, which became the template for freedom of religion at the national level, was the hard-won product of political and military mobilization during the War of Independence and the early years of the peace. As a social history, it is a superb telling of an inadequately explored part of the revolution in Virginia. *Wellspring of Liberty* deserves to take a prominent place on the shelf of religious and social history during the American Revolution."-- s in History"This creative and accessible work is required reading for scholars of the Revolution, and it offers important revisions to the history of church and state in early America."--North Carolina Historical "Remarkably detailed and informative. Indeed, no one has told the story better...Ragosta's book should become a staple among those books that examine the early history and development of the American ideal of separation of church and state. Works like this one that inform and help clarify a complex issue are of considerable value to scholars and students alike."--American Historical "Ragosta's focused, persuasive, and meticulously researched argument has the potential to change how we think about nonconforming religion and the struggle for independence...*Wellspring of Liberty* not only provides insight into the particulars of the conflict for the largest, most populous, and richest colony--sometimes contrasting the situation in Virginia with the situation in other southern colonies as well--it helps us to more precisely understand the true implications of the Great Awakening as well as the threat of establishing an Anglican bishop as catalysts to American independence."--Anglican and Episcopal History"[Ragosta] presents a fascinating account for his readers about the established church's control slipping from its grasp, the dissenters' eventual success, and our inheritance of religious freedom."--Religioust Studies About the AuthorJohn A. Ragosta is currently the Robert C. Vaughan Fellow at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. He received his PhD in history and his law degree from the University of Virginia. He has taught at Hamilton College, UVA, Randolph College, and George Washington University. Prior to earning his PhD, Dr. Ragosta practiced international trade law and litigation in Washington, DC. He also keeps bees in Culpeper, Virginia.