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Samuel Davies and Slave Literacy

Part II

Lead: Although teaching slaves to read was forbidden, the Rev. Samuel Davies, inspired by the Great Awakening, led a campaign to bring slaves the light of knowledge and of the Gospel.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Samuel Davies was born in New Castle, Delaware, in 1723. He was ordained 1747 and the following year moved to Hanover County, in the Virginia heartland. Davies had been caught up in the mid 18th

century movement of religious enthusiasm known as the Great Awakening. Originating with the fiery New England sermons of Jonathan Edwards and spread by itinerant evangelists such as Gilbert Tennant and the English cleric, George Whitfield, with passionate and emotional preaching, the movement emphasized internal faith over church doctrine and encouraged the cultivation of a personal relationship with God. Often those inspired by this revival emerged with a sense of responsibility for the spiritual lives of slaves and Native Americans.

Samuel Davies subscribed to the belief that reading and hearing Scripture were indispensable to the

practice of true religion. Soon after arriving in Virginia Davies spearheaded an effort to teach Virginia blacks, both slave and free, to read so that they could examine the Bible and hopefully become converts to Christianity.

While on a fund-raising trip to England to raise money for the new College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), he procured books and funds from the London-based Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge among the Poor and successfully distributed books and Bibles to hundreds of slaves. In addition, he personally conducted classes in reading and writing for the many blacks who were drawn to his

ministry.

In 1759, still devoted to education, Davies became the fourth president of the college in Princeton. He served for just eighteen months before dying from pneumonia after being bled for a bad cold, but his legacy lived on in the lives of the many Virginia blacks whom he helped on the road to literacy and knowledge.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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