RELIGION AND POLITICS: JAMES O’KELLY’S REPUBLICANISM AND FRANCIS ASBURY’S FEDERALISM

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In 1798 James O’Kelly published *The Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government*. It was a searing, public manifesto against his former boss, Francis Asbury. O’Kelly joined a Methodist Society around 1775 and Francis Asbury assigned him to the affluent Tidewater region of southern Virginia. O’Kelly was quickly given the office of supervising Elder over circuits in Virginia and North Carolina. He is best known, however, for what scholars call “the O’Kelly Schism,” his break from Methodism and Francis Asbury’s nearly tyrannical rule over the new denomination, in 1792. In 1794 O’Kelly started the Republican Methodists and many of his followers initially joined his new denomination. By the mid-1790s, however, the Republican Methodists were floundering under O’Kelly’s leadership and many of his adherents returned to Asbury’s Methodism. It was in this climate that O’Kelly published his *Apology*.¹

Past treatments of this tumultuous episode in early Methodist history focused on the denominational politics, personality traits, and evangelistic fallout of the schism. On the surface, blame for the tear in the newly woven American Methodist fabric rests mostly on O’Kelly’s ferocious ambition.

and feisty temper, and partly on Asbury’s dictatorial Anglican proclivities. The schism, however, was the inevitable product of the collision of two entirely different languages: O’Kelly’s fierce, patriotic, and decidedly American republicanism and Asbury’s apolitical Wesleyan and Anglican, and therefore British, brogue. This language barrier culminated in the schism that initially drew thousands of Methodists to O’Kelly’s new denomination in southern Virginia and the piedmont of North Carolina.²

Some scholars of Methodism assert that early American Methodism was devoid of politics. Darius Salter’s assessment is typical: “To understand the Methodists’ feud with James O’Kelly within any type of systemic context, cultural or political, was entirely beyond Asbury’s comprehension.” Asbury may have been oblivious, but a denomination arising out of the new republic cannot be unaffected by the politics of the times. The political arena of the early republic was rife with contention and intrigue. The rise of federalism evoked a heated response from republicans and the battle between the two camps permeated the news and gossip of the 1790s. Thus, Dee E. Andrews more realistically notes that “Maintaining the separation of churches and government proved more difficult than enlightened thinkers or their Methodist allies had hoped.”³

While modern scholars often allude to O’Kelly’s republicanism, Asbury’s federalist tendencies are rarely explored. When compared to the greater political intrigues of their day, the feud between James O’Kelly and Francis Asbury simply becomes a microcosm of the battles between the Republicans and the Federalists in the 1790s. This paper reexamines the O’Kelly Schism from the perspective of the political battles of the 1790s and asserts that the schism is best understood within this cultural dynamic, not within denominational politics.

I

Previous explorations of the events leading up to the O’Kelly Schism examined a series of exchanges published from 1798-1802, nearly a decade removed from the beginnings of O’Kelly’s clash with Asbury’s authority. In 1798 O’Kelly, using the pseudonym “Christicola,” published his Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Church, which Frederick A. Norwood described as a “purely personal attack on Asbury.”


Asbury, ever the itinerant gentleman, publicly tried to remain above the fray but, at the insistence of other itinerants, responded by enlisting Nicholas Snethen to publish *A Reply to An Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government* in 1800. O'Kelly quickly fired back in 1801 with *A Vindication of the Author's Apology* to which Snethen then published *An Answer to James O'Kelly's Vindication...* in 1802. Interestingly, Snethen was actually sympathetic with O'Kelly, a fact that suggests there was more to this exchange than just a personal feud. From these pamphlets, as well as recollections of itinerants and collections of letters, scholars have concluded that the ever-divisive and power-hungry O'Kelly, frustrated by Asbury's unrelenting authority, deliberately broke away from the Methodists to form a new and rival denomination.

This conclusion ignores the cultural events through which the participants perceived the issues in the late 1790s and reveals two prejudicial assumptions. First, scholars have assumed that the ever tempestuous O'Kelly was a schismatic and, second, that the secession of O'Kelly in 1792, therefore, was inevitable if not deliberate. These conclusions reveal a lingering bias concerning the schism that is evident throughout the denominational histories and biographies of leading itinerants in O'Kelly's day. The evidence, however, is not that conclusive. Early spats between James O'Kelly and Francis Asbury in the 1780s were the products of two ambitious ministers competing for powerful positions in their new, and still evolving, denomination. Itinerants contemporary with Asbury and O'Kelly often lamented the tensions between the two powerful Methodist leaders, but these theological and ecclesiastical squabbles never led to schism. Indeed, when schism seemed inevitable, both Asbury and O'Kelly worked humbly and doggedly to keep the fledgling denomination afloat. Several examples illustrate this peculiar interpersonal itinerant dynamic.


In May 1779, after several years of debate, O’Kelly and several other Virginia ministers ordained themselves at Broken Back Church in Fluvanna County, Virginia, in order to take communion to their church members. Asbury, at the Baltimore Conference in April 1780, sought to excommunicate these ministers and tensions mounted quickly. At the May 1780 Virginia Conference meeting in Manakin Town, Virginia, Asbury—or possibly O’Kelly, the sources disagree—suggested a years’ truce from the Virginians’ actions. During this interim they sagely sought the advice of John Wesley and a year later the matter was forgotten. Freeborn Garrettson recalled that schism was not the motive of the Virginia ministers. Instead, meeting the spiritual needs of the Virginians was the main goal. Indeed, Asbury’s journal entries for this period reveal no animosity toward O’Kelly for these actions, even though O’Kelly was clearly in the middle of this insubordination. If O’Kelly entertained schismatic inclinations this was a propitious time to do so, but such was not the case. Whoever initiated the truce, wisdom and humility prevailed on both sides and a division was spared. 6

In 1789 O’Kelly began preaching against Asbury’s power. William Spencer, an itinerant who served under O’Kelly, recalled that O’Kelly used to preach “Glory to Jesus, Glory to God,” but that in 1789 it was “Government, government, government, we shall all be ruined … popery! Despotism!” Spencer labeled O’Kelly as “divisive,” but this recollection and accusation was penned in 1809 in the aftermath of O’Kelly’s tumultuous break from Methodism when powerful feelings and denominational pride were still strongly raging. Was O’Kelly really trying to incite secession from Asbury’s Methodists in 1789? What sparked O’Kelly’s political vituperations? 7

In order to serve better the ever-growing Methodist denomination Asbury initiated a new General Council, composed of hand-selected members, to help him set the agenda for the individual conferences. Asbury invited O’Kelly to be a member of this General Council, which first met in December 1789, in Baltimore. The ever-ambitious O’Kelly attended the ini-

6 O’Kelly, Apology, 5, says he called for the truce; Edward Dromgoole, Dromgoole Papers, says Asbury proposed the one-year hiatus. Jesse Lee, A Short History of the Methodists (Baltimore: Magill and Cline, 1810), 72ff., recalls that O’Kelly was one of the “influential preachers in that separation in favor of the ordinances.” Leroy M. Lee, The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee (Charleston, SC: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1848), 85, noted that Jesse Lee remembered Asbury made the proposal for the one-year moratorium on serving communion but that “all were jubilant over the decision and the apparent unity it brought.” Either way, this demonstrates that both Asbury and O’Kelly worked for the greater good of the denomination. Francis Asbury, The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, “The Journal,” Elmer T. Clark, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press; London: Epworth Press, 1958) 1: 365-424. Garrettson, American Methodist Pioneers, 392. According to Garrettson, 104, the Revolutionary War disrupted the service of communion by local Anglican ministers.

tial meeting but when he arrived back in Virginia he began preaching against what he termed Asbury’s "despotic" power. Two things changed O’Kelly’s mind concerning Asbury’s General Council. First, O’Kelly recalled that the Virginia ministers did not like Asbury’s new form of government, which O’Kelly called a “constitution.” The people and the ministers of Virginia never chose the governmental system Asbury put in place. This reflects what Jon Butler describes as the dominant elites’ influence over local churches. Inspired by the local folks who wanted more democratic control over their religious lives, O’Kelly preached against what he perceived as Asbury’s despotism. Second, O’Kelly began to see a marked northern influence in Asbury’s decisions and, as we will see, O’Kelly linked this to a growing fear of northern Federalism encroaching upon the southern penchant for Republican values.

The regional context helps us to understand better O’Kelly’s rising fear of Asbury’s new government. Lisle A. Rose points out that from 1789-1791 southerners became increasingly anxious of the ever more centralized government in Washington. Southerners, afraid of northern influences, became suspicious of what they perceived as a Federalist plot to take over the south. Federalists were especially strong in Virginia and they were concentrated in the Tidewater region, the very territory of O’Kelly’s district. More specifically, Rose points out that William Loughton Smith perceived the presidential power of removability as a monarchist plot from John Adams and Massachusetts. In O’Kelly’s eyes Asbury appeared to be yet another northern Federalist and in his Apology he described some of Asbury’s actions in north-south dichotomies. O’Kelly’s main objection to Asbury’s new government was the right to remove itinerants or even expel and banish them with no appeal process. It is fair to say that once O’Kelly saw that Asbury’s General Council bore the same marks as Washington’s power of removal, O’Kelly then adopted antifederalist rhetoric and publicly preached that Asbury was a British monarchical pope.


Asbury listened to wise counsel from fellow itinerants, as well as a stern warning in a letter from O'Kelly to Asbury, and backed away from the questionable General Council to the more democratic General Conference. Asbury also wrote O'Kelly a letter asking for the dove of peace between the two. O'Kelly apparently responded favorably because Asbury records in his journal on Aug 21, 1791 that “All is peace—it was obtained by a kind letter from me to O'Kelly.” O'Kelly later explained to Jesse Nicholson that he only wanted the Council idea overturned, not Methodism itself. From this correspondence we again see that both ministers, while ambitiously pursuing their version of Methodism, were humble enough to seek unity, not division.10

A third confrontation between O'Kelly and Asbury occurred when the first General Conference was held November 1-15, 1792 in Baltimore. O'Kelly publicly confronted Asbury about his assignment of itinerants with no right of appeal and without any assistance from district elders. Whether it was out of fear (or respect) of Asbury or because of O'Kelly’s contentious attitude at the conference, O'Kelly’s peers would not stand with him against Asbury. Humiliated by Asbury, betrayed by Thomas Coke who had previously indicated he would support O'Kelly against Asbury, and broken in spirit because his own colleagues failed him, O'Kelly left the Conference a dejected man. He was not despondent enough to forge a new denomination. In late 1792 and into 1793, O'Kelly twice tried to make amends with Asbury. O'Kelly’s followers even sought his reinstatement into the Methodist ranks. Throughout this separation O'Kelly claimed that he had no intention of forming a separate “party” and that he continued to bring repentant souls to the Methodist fold. Asbury still paid O'Kelly a salary during this time, yet we can only imagine Asbury’s consternation and mental anguish over whether to keep the opinionated O'Kelly in the Methodist Episcopal Church or let him go. Still, despite deep personal emotions, both Asbury and O'Kelly initially worked toward reconciliation in order to keep the fledgling denomination alive. Asbury eventually refused to reinstate O'Kelly as a traveling itinerant, possibly because O'Kelly refused to drop the political appellation “Republican” from the name of the Methodists. Did this mean that Asbury had Federalist inclinations?11

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The fact that none of O’Kelly’s contemporaries could settle on a consistent reason for his exit from the Methodist Episcopal Church suggests that O’Kelly did not intentionally seek schism. Fellow itinerants thought O’Kelly left because Asbury did not or would not make O’Kelly a bishop. Asbury himself did not understand why O’Kelly left the fold and wondered if O’Kelly’s disaffection was either over the unfulfilled desire to be bishop or the threat of being relocated. Following these leads, historians have long concluded that O’Kelly’s break with Methodism in 1792 was caused by one or a combination of four things: (1) O’Kelly’s fear of public disclosure of potentially heretical doctrines; (2) his failure to become a bishop, like Asbury and Thomas Coke; (3) the Methodist’s decisions not to publish his Essay on Negro Slavery; (4) or, the threat of Asbury to relocate O’Kelly from his prestigious district in lower Virginia to a lesser district in a developing area of Methodist backcountry. But two historians see a broader cultural context behind O’Kelly’s motive. W. H. Daniels, writing in 1880, argued that O’Kelly’s politics, not his ambition, drove him to “modify and flavor his religion.” O’Kelly believed that, “because a republican form of government was good for the state, it was, therefore, good for the Church.” Milo True Morrill, writing in 1912, who was quite aware of O’Kelly’s propensity to tyranny and hysteria, stated that O’Kelly disagreed with Asbury’s chosen form of church government, which was unsatisfactory to Virginia ministers. O’Kelly did not want schism. He simply wanted Asbury to work within the emerging American republican form of representational government. Anything less was monarchist, popish, and British.12

With the rise of Federalism in the 1790s, Methodism, as Dee Andrews has pointed out, began to feel the effects of the national political debates and partisanship soon emerged within its ranks. In the middle-Atlantic states Federalism tore into Methodism and began threatening its apolitical solidarity. In the southern circuits and especially in Virginia, Federalist tendencies within Asbury’s Methodist polity were being questioned. Suddenly other itinerants also were contesting Asbury’s rule. With this politicization within Methodism O’Kelly’s Republican Methodists initially were very successful in Virginia. Indeed, the name “Republican” was propitiously chosen to tag onto the growing Republican political movement of the early 1790s. In a state where Federalists were unpopular, thousands of Virginians left the fold of Methodism for O’Kelly’s Republican Methodists between 1793 and 1795. But by the mid-1790s the new denomination started to flounder, partly because of O’Kelly’s lack of administrative abilities, but mostly because of his continual caustic preaching against Asbury’s Methodist government. It is very telling that it was only in the wake of O’Kelly’s sinking

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Republican Methodists and at the height of the national political jousts between republican and federalist political combatants that O’Kelly penned his *Apology* utilizing the rhetoric of government to repaint the past schism in political terms.\(^3\)

As Federalism reared its head within Asbury’s denomination, the Methodists divided into political camps. O’Kelly must have seen the divisions among Asbury’s faithful as chance to assert his political theology once more. He noted in a rather desperate tone in his *Apology* that he only wanted to rejoin the Methodists. Was this a ploy to save what was left of his denomination? Or was it a last ditch effort to pull divided people to a more ameliorative O’Kelly? It is difficult to discern his motive but one clue for the pamphlet is offered by O’Kelly. Looking back to the early days of the Methodist Episcopal Church he lamented that “in those days we knew but little of government.” But in the 1790s, with the national political scene in turmoil, O’Kelly restated why he detested Asbury’s form of church government. In the political light of the 1790s, Asbury, in O’Kelly’s estimation, was a British, aristocratic Federalist.\(^4\)

**II**

With this background in mind, we need to switch perspectives and examine this scenario within the general political culture of the 1790s. Nathan O. Hatch describes the populist movement that challenged the religious establishment after the revolutionary war. He asserts that, as religion became disestablished, an assault on tradition and authority led by common folk who felt they were more in tune with God than elitist clerics took over from 1780-1800. In this “violence of politics” Hatch states that Republican equality challenged political authority and even the legitimacy of religious offices. A volatile “gospel of the backcountry” emerged that “resonated with powerful Anti-Federalist and Jeffersonian persuasions.” Politics, as Hatch demonstrates, was now influencing religion and O’Kelly was one of the major politicians.\(^5\)

Asbury may have been oblivious to this politicization of his denomination, but he unwittingly echoed the classic traits of Federalism. His General

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\(^4\) O’Kelly, *Apology*, 12, 119, where he ended his pamphlet with the notation that he only wanted union with them all.

Council was nothing but an aristocratic, oligarchic hand-picked committee. O'Kelly, in his *Apology*, recalled that Thomas Coke at the famous 1792 conference in Baltimore even called Asbury’s form of government “aristocratic.” Abury’s preference for titles and the aristocratic attire of bishops connected him with the elites. The major actors in the rise of Federalism were in the North and we have seen that Asbury was regularly equated with northerners by O'Kelly. Since Anglicanism was gaining a stronghold in the North and Asbury was acting more like an Anglican bishop, it was only natural for O'Kelly to assume that he was recreating the very British government the Americans had fought so hard to eradicate.¹⁶

Part of the problem was the language used by both O’Kelly and Asbury. Andrews points out that “O’Kelly’s language was a unique blend of Old Testament and antifederalist rhetoric.” Russell E. Richey takes this point a step further and illustrates how Asbury utilized an Anglican, British language of episcopacy while O’Kelly combined the emerging mythology of American republicanism with Calvinist theology. As long as both of these Methodist leaders continued to speak different political languages there was no hope of any reconciliation. British and American political language was dominant, if not necessarily obvious to some, in the exchanges between O’Kelly and Asbury.¹⁷

Once the role of politics is noted in O’Kelly’s clash with Asbury, the role of significant major political events on O’Kelly’s behavior provides more illumination for the discussion. In 1789 the new American government had a “problem,” as Elkins and McKitrick termed it. “This was the general question of titles, ceremony, and official etiquette.” Vice-President John Adams preferred the deference due to monarchy and pushed for such display in President Washington’s attire, titles, and public appearances. Francis Asbury unwittingly echoed this political culture with his aristocratic preference of titles, ceremony, and official etiquette as he organized Methodism into the first American denomination. In a move that later merited a stern rebuke from John Wesley himself, Asbury initially asked that he be called “Bishop” when addressed. Just as the new president George Washington was asked to dress like British royalty, Asbury donned the cassock and gown in 1785. Respected itinerant Jesse Lee lamented this ostentatious display but Asbury apparently continued to wear the religious raiment because when Jesse Lee was ordained an Elder in 1790, he hoped the Bishop would not wear “a gown and band” during his ordination.¹⁸


Fear of executive power and the corruption of patronage sparked the fire of the American Revolution. But when President George Washington began to assemble his cabinet in 1789 this fear arose once more in various minds throughout the new nation. The President’s personal selection of a small coterie of powerful people smelled too much like British monarchy for many post-revolutionary political leaders. Amid this emerging national flap Francis Asbury unwittingly stepped into the same problem. With the increase in Methodists geographically and numerically, Asbury, who was never the epitome of health, was physically strapped to care for the whole denomination. To remedy this he personally selected a small group of powerful itinerants to give him counsel and to make important decisions that would then be voted upon by the individual districts. James O’Kelly was chosen to be on this Council and he gladly accepted the call and appeared at the first meeting in December 1789.

The plan for the Council was flawed from its very inception. Jesse Lee recalled, “A majority of the preachers voted in favor of it, but they were soon sensible, that the plan would not answer the purpose for which it was intended.” The authoritative Asbury, like George Washington, hand-picked the Council members, but also had the authority to remove them any time, thus unwittingly fostering the very national fear of increasingly despotic powers among American leaders. Asbury’s Council revealed absolutist tendencies and gave Asbury a power of nullification that too closely resembled Washington’s power of removability. In essence, all denominational power was now in Asbury’s hands. O’Kelly, glad to join the Council in 1789 quickly changed his position concerning the Council after he arrived home. Why did he make such a quick turnaround?

We explored above four answers to this question that all seemed less than plausible. A better answer is that, given the national political debates and the public consternation over George Washington’s Federalist tendencies, O’Kelly, ever the Republican, correctly perceived the same Federalist notions in Asbury’s Council. As Hamiltonianism picked up speed and John Adams revealed monarchical tendencies, an emerging “royalist sentiment,” as John Ferling terms it, emerged in the new nation. From these national events we can see that Francis Asbury unwittingly acted in a way that, to O’Kelly, marked him as a northern, monarchical Federalist. His General Council resembled the Federalist penchant for small, oligarchic government. The Council also meant centralized government rather than local rule for the Methodists. Added to that, Asbury’s propensity to dress like a British bish-

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op was too much aristocratic display for the republican ethos that was growing in America. Mark A. Noll points out that the emerging powers of the nation were predominantly northern and that northern churches were increasingly becoming formalist, as opposed to southern churches becoming more antiformalist. E. Brooks Holifield also notes that an emerging theological rift between northern “high churches” and southern evangelical churches was also part of the complex post-revolutionary culture at this time. If, as Noll notes, Francis Asbury’s formalist system of classes, circuits, quarterly meetings, and annual conferences was the “system of ligaments tying together the people of a nation” after the Revolution, then James O’Kelly was quite justified in worrying about the cold northern wind of Asbury’s increasing, and potentially despotic, powers.21

In the South the Federalist threat was right in O’Kelly’s ministerial backyard. By 1789-1791, fearful of the dominance of the north in political and economic systems, the southern states were increasingly against centralized government. Lisle A. Rose points out that, of the southern states, only Virginia had a large contingent of Federalists, but they were limited to Richmond, Norfolk, the Eastern Shore and the area of Alexandria. O’Kelly’s circuits carried him to churches near Richmond, and Norfolk, so he would have been aware of Federalist tendencies in these areas. James H. Broussard asserts that, “worn-out Tidewater counties, formerly growing tobacco but now declining into corn production, were also friendly to Federalists.” In essence, O’Kelly the staunch patriotic republican, would have seen signs everywhere of a growing threat of Federalism in his circuits and possibly among his church members. He was no doubt a member of the very strong antifederalist movement in southside Virginia.22

As Federalist tactics emerged, promulgated by northern elites, many southerners saw a frightening pattern of British oppression in the works once more. Virginian James Madison warned of an “antirepublican party” and was one of the first to use the term “party.” He called for the creation of a political party to counter the politics of the north. Madison called the new party the Republican party in 1792. On top of this, in response to the British war against France, Democratic-Republican Societies emerged throughout America in 1793-1794. Since many Americans feared that the fate of the still teetering republic of America depended on the outcome of the Revolution in France, these societies galvanized support against anything that reeked of Britain, including Federalism. If Asbury’s Methodism was becoming more Federalist, then there was only one thing for O’Kelly and others to do: form

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22 Lisle, 5-9, 69; Broussard, 200, 383; Cornell, 22, 53.
a new party and break away from the monarchical heretics. And this is exactly what O’Kelly did when he formed the Republican Methodists in 1794.\footnote{Ferling, 339-341, 344-345, 362-363. O’Kelly, Apology, 42, maintains that he initially did not want to form a “party.”}

In Virginia, a state where the two rival factions had equally divided the vote, Republicans claimed sixteen of the nineteen seats available in the 1792 elections. If the national Republicans could win such power, then surely O’Kelly could succeed against Asbury as well. Thus, as O’Kelly’s efforts to rejoin the Methodists failed in 1793, it is no coincidence that O’Kelly, hoping to ride the coattails of the Democratic-Republican movement, took the very popular name of Republican Methodists in 1794 to counter what he perceived as Asbury’s link to the British. He hoped the new political sobriquet would lead potential believers as well as current Methodists to join his more American denomination rather than put up with Asbury’s monarchical, British polity. Asbury, despite his propensity to reserve judgments, was no fool. He recognized the political aspects of O’Kelly’s movement. While in Charlotte County, Virginia, on April 23, 1794, Asbury recorded his worries about O’Kelly’s followers, “those who have left us...are now exerting themselves to form as strong a party as they can.” In a time when some itinerants, like James Meacham, referred to O’Kelly’s faction as the “Republican Conference,” Asbury’s use of the term “party” is curious here unless it refers more to the political context of the day than to religious polity. Even Jesse Lee used the term. Writing about the 1792 conference, when O’Kelly left the Methodist ranks, Lee correctly predicted that O’Kelly would start his own party. Later, Lee, writing about O’Kelly and the rising dissension in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1793, remembered that O’Kelly’s “separate party appeared to prosper in making proselytes for itself...” By 1796, party divisions had torn apart Virginia churches. Virginia Episcopalian minister Devereux Jarratt lamented that the Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Methodists were “splitting and falling to pieces” because of party distinctions. The political war of the 1790s was now being waged in the pews.\footnote{Ferling, 353; Francis Asbury, Journal, entry for April 23, 1794; James Meacham, “A Journal and Travel of James Meacham, Part I, May 19-Aug 31, 1789,” Historical Papers, Trinity College Historical Society, Series IX (1912), 97. Leroy Lee, The Life and Times, 274; Jesse Lee, A Short History, 205. Devereux Jarratt, The Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt, Rector of Bath Parish, Dinwiddie County, Virginia (Baltimore: Warner & Hanna, 1806), 180.} By the mid-1790s the Federalist threat was worse in Virginia. With the passage of Jay’s Treaty, southern fears were further incited. The treaty was seen by southerners as yet another British domination over commercial interests. Federalists in Virginia and North Carolina united in order to ease the tensions and they even managed to pass a resolution in Virginia condemning President Washington for his complicity in the matter. Despite this ameliorative move, the very fact that Federalists had passed anything in Virginia was seen as yet more evidence that the Federalists were gaining...
momentum. Patrick Henry, perhaps viewing a bid for the presidency, emerged as pro-federalist in 1795 and by 1796 Federalist activity in Virginia was at its peak. Pro-federalist rallies took place in Richmond, Williamsburg, and Petersburg, again all within O’Kelly’s district. When France’s treatment of Cotesworth Pickney in 1796 became public, Federalists seized the day in Virginia, and many Republicans joined them.\(^{25}\)

In 1797 O’Kelly moved to his new farm and mill in Chatham County, NC, where the Federalist threat was even worse. In the counties surrounding O’Kelly’s plantation—Guilford, Orange, Wake, Cumberland, and Moore—Federalists were the dominant political party. In the borough towns of North Carolina, including Hillsborough, which was a commercial center for crops near O’Kelly’s plantation, two-thirds of the leaders were Federalist. In 1798 and 1800 four of ten congressmen were Federalists and the North Carolina state legislature was two-fifths Federalists in 1800. Even the governors of North Carolina were Federalist. Ferling notes that by 1798 the Federalist hold on American government had never been stronger. O’Kelly’s move from Virginia to North Carolina did not relieve him from the threat of Federalism.\(^{26}\)

It cannot be a coincidence that, in 1798, at the height of Federalism in Virginia and North Carolina, in the same year that Thomas Jefferson penned what became known as the “Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions,” James O’Kelly also published his Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government. The publication of the Apology came as O’Kelly’s Republican Methodists were falling apart and Asbury’s Methodists, governed by a federalist system, were gaining new ground. This suggests that politics, not ambition and religious differences, was behind O’Kelly’s Apology.

\(^{25}\) Rose, Prologue to Democracy, 112-129, and sections IV and V.

\(^{26}\) Ferling, 425.