

Taken from [Getting Jefferson Right: Fact Checking Claims about Our Third President](#), by Warren Throckmorton & Michael Coulter. (183-187). This section is taken from the unpublished 2nd Edition which is in progress. The first edition was published in 2012.

Did the University of Virginia have chaplains?

In *The Jefferson Lies*, Barton aims to debunk a claim that the University of Virginia had no chaplains. Indeed, a volunteer office of chaplain evolved after Jefferson's death. Jefferson did not create the position, so it is unclear why Barton makes this claim. Jefferson left decisions about religious matters to the Board of Visitors of the school and did not make any recommendations about the office of chaplain. In all the writing Jefferson did about public education, he did not mention a role for a chaplain.

Nonetheless, Barton brings together a couple of items to make it appear that Jefferson was in on the activity of creating chaplains. First, Barton says the reason chaplains were not involved in the first years at the University was because the school needed to establish a reputation as a transdenominational institution. Without providing any evidence, he claims:

At the beginning, when the university was establishing its reputation as a transdenominational university, the school had no appointed chaplains for the same reason that there had been no clergyman as president and no single professor of divinity; an ordained clergyman in any of those three positions might send an incorrect signal that the university was aligned with a certain denomination. By 1829, when the nondenominational reputation of the university had been fully established, James Madison (who became rector of the university after Jefferson's death in 1826) announced "that [permanent] provision for religious instruction and observance among the students would be made by...services of clergymen."ⁱ

Second, Barton cites Jefferson's listing of prominent religious denominations in the state of Virginia. When the speculation is combined with Jefferson's listing of denominations in an unrelated letter (see below), it could appear to the reader that Jefferson had some role in causing a delay of appointing chaplains along with the means of identifying suitable people to fill the position.

After inaccurately claiming that university president James Madison announced the appointment of chaplains, Barton writes:

The university therefore extended official recognition to one primary chaplain for all the students, with the chaplain position rotating annually among the major denominations, which Jefferson identified as the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans.ⁱⁱ

This combination of phrases makes it sound like Jefferson had a hand in a plan to rotate the position among the four major denominations in Virginia. However, he had no direct role since he wasn't alive, having died in 1826. In an unrelated letter to Thomas Cooper, Jefferson once identified the four main denominations in Virginia, but Jefferson did not mention a scheme of selecting chaplains in that letter. Furthermore, since the university was not founded as a transdenominational school, there was no need to delay setting up the chaplain position for the purpose Barton claims. As we will point out below, the reputation of the school in the early days was anything but religious.

Religious activities were contemplated at the school, but not as an integral part of the curriculum as Barton claims. Rather, Jefferson wrote in his 1818 Rockfish Gap report:

It is supposed probable, that a building of somewhat more size in the middle of the grounds may be called for in time, in which may be rooms for religious worship, under such impartial regulations as the Visitors shall prescribe, for public examinations, for a library, for the schools of music, drawing, and other associated purposes.ⁱⁱⁱ

As noted in the section on Jefferson's religious views, prayer and worship were not foreign to him. However, in this educational endeavor, having a place for religious worship was something that could come "in time...under such impartial regulations as the Visitors shall prescribe." Chaplains were eventually recognized by the university, but Jefferson had no role in developing those "impartial regulations" beyond acknowledging the possibility of religious worship sometime in the future.

To prove that the University of Virginia had a chaplain, Barton cites what he calls an advertisement (it is actually in the "Miscellaneous" section) from the September 8, 1837 edition of a Washington, D.C. paper, *The Globe*. Rather than an ad, the citation is a reprint of a letter chaplain Septimus Tuston sent to a friend. Barton does not provide the date of the letter in the text of his book; doing so would have made it clear that Tuston wrote long after the founding of the school and Jefferson's death. The letter was first printed in the *Charlestown Free Press* from earlier in 1837.

Barton cites Tuston's description of religious activities at the university but he does not cite the letter fully. In it, Tuston reveals what he considered to be the public perception of the University of Virginia in the early days. Recall that Barton claims that chaplains came along when the public accepted the "transdenominational" nature of the school. However, Tuston told his friend a different story.

But I feel more concerned to give you a correct impression of the religious character of the University than I do to furnish you with an outline of its external arrangements or its internal regulations. *It is well known that, for several years after its operations commenced, the institution had to encounter the most uncompromising prejudices of the pious portion of the community. It was by many supposed the infidelity was interwoven with the very elements of its existence, and, consequently, its early history was overhung with the clouds of discouragement.* How far these prejudices were just may be ascertained from the fact, not generally known, that, in the original organization of this establishment, the privilege of erecting Theological Seminaries on the territory belonging to the university was cheerfully extended to every Christian denomination within the limits of the state.^{iv} (emphasis added)

According to Tuston, most people thought the University of Virginia was hostile to religion in the early days. There were no worries among the leaders of the school about getting beyond a reputation of being too religious or associated with one denomination. Barton's speculation is unfounded, not even consistent with his own evidence.

Why was the reputation of infidelity at the University widespread? One must consider that Jefferson was widely known as the founder of the school and his religious reputation was also associated with

it. As it turned out, the school was not as unfriendly to religion as many believed but it did not have a chaplain when Jefferson was involved.

Another aspect of the chaplain story bears comment. Barton takes portions of a letter written by James Madison and selectively portrays the quote as an announcement about chaplains. Here again is what Barton quotes from Madison:

By 1829, when the nondenominational reputation of the university had been fully established, James Madison (who became rector of the university after Jefferson's death in 1826) announced "that [permanent] provision for religious instruction and observance among the students would be made by...services of clergymen."^v

Rather than a public announcement or a policy change, Madison wrote those words in a May 1, 1828 letter to Chapman Johnson, one of the members of the university Board of Visitors. The actual quote depicts a completely different meaning than Barton implies. Here is the entire section of the letter, from which Barton lifts his quote. Barton leaves out the words from Madison which are required to understand the meaning. Another unwarranted change Barton makes is to add the word "permanent." What Barton omitted is in italics below.

I have indulged more particularly the hope, that provision for religious instruction and observances among the Students, would be made by themselves or their Parents & Guardians, each contributing to a fund to be applied, in remunerating the services of Clergymen, of denominations, corresponding with the preference of the contributors. Small contributions would suffice, and the arrangement would become more & more efficient & adequate, as the Students become more numerous; whilst being altogether voluntary, it would interfere neither with the characteristic peculiarity of the University, the consecrated principle of the law, nor the spirit of the Country.^{vi}

Contrary to Barton's claim, Madison did not make an announcement in 1828 that permanent provision for religious worship would be made by clergymen. Instead, he told one of the university board members his hope that parents and students would voluntarily secure clergymen to provide religious services if so desired by the parents and students. Indeed, reading the entire letter, Madison's view was that such instruction should come in this voluntary manner rather than having it come via the hiring of members of the clergy to teach.^{vii} Such an arrangement would preserve the independence of the school from religious entanglements and disputes while respecting the free exercise of religion. Barton's selective quotation of a primary source obscures Madison's meaning and adds a revised one he apparently prefers.

ⁱ *The Jefferson Lies*, 56.

ⁱⁱ *The Jefferson Lies*, 256.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rockfish Gap Report of the Commissioners of the University of Virginia, August 1, 1818, retrieved from <http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/rotunda/prefire/rockfish2.html>

^{iv} Septimus Tuston, "University of Virginia." *The Globe*, September 8, 1837, 2.

^v *The Jefferson Lies*, 56.

^{vi} James Madison, *The Papers of James Madison*, Library of Congress, May 1, 1828, accessed from <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi->

[bin/ampage?collId=mjm&fileName=22/mjm22.db&recNum=380&itemLink=D?mjm:3:/temp/~amme
m_T4Vr:](http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FGEA-chron-1820-1828-05-01-1), and compared with the transcription at the Early Access project of the University of Virginia and accessed at <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FGEA-chron-1820-1828-05-01-1>.

^{vii} Madison's letter to Johnson was on the subject of whether or not a prospective faculty member, William Ritchie, was a member of the clergy. Johnson thought Ritchie probably was not a clergyman but thought it would be fine if he was. However, Madison disagreed saying that religious jealousies and disputes would be inevitable if ministers occupied faculty positions. Madison told Johnson: "I cannot but think nevertheless, that desirable as it may be that the Professors should be exemplary in a proper respect for Religion as in everything else, it will be better to have that benefit separated from, than united with the Ecclesiastical profession, in an Institution, essentially un-sectarian." Madison then told Chapman that voluntary religious services paid for by parents and students was the better approach (as we noted in the book) James Madison to Chapman Johnson, May 1, 1828. Retrieved from <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FGEA-chron-1820-1828-05-01-1>.