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James Madison’s family traditions were wholly colonial and extended back to the first settlement of Virginia. With the mother country he had no living connection, and only one member of the family, his second cousin, Rev. James Madison, received any part of his education there. England was not, therefore, home to the Madison’s as it was to many other Virginia families, and there were no divisions of the house and consequent heartburning when the separation came, but all of them embraced the patriot cause in the beginning and without hesitation. From the shores of Chesapeake Bay, where James Madison’s direct ancestor, John Madison, received a patent for lands in 1653, the family pushed its way inland towards the Blue Ridge Mountains, and his grand-father, Ambrose, occupied the tract in Orange County where his father, James, and himself spent their entire lives. He was thus completely a Virginian, and his life was well rooted, as George Eliot has expressed it, in a spot of his native land, where it received "the love of tender kinship for the face of earth." During the eighty-four years of his life he was never continuously absent from Montpelier for a twelvemonth.

The Virginia convention of 1776 was composed chiefly of men past the middle period of life; but there was a small circle of young members who afterwards rose to eminence, among whom was Madison, then but twenty-three years old. He was known personally too few of his colleagues and was mastered by a shrinking modesty, which kept him in the background; but he had the reputation of being a scholar and was put on the committee to draw up the Declaration of Rights. He made one motion in the convention, offering a substitute to the clause relating to religious freedom. It was not accepted as he presented it, but a modification, eliminating a chief objection to the clause as originally presented by the committee, was adopted. If Madison's clause had been taken as he wrote it, there would have been no occasion for the subsequent struggle for complete religious freedom in Virginia, for it was so sweeping that any further progressive action would have been redundant. The offering of this amendment was Madison's first important public act, and his belief that it was right was the strongest belief he had at that time.

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