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Petition of Citizens
of Bedford & Cambridge
for the incorporation of
religious and Benevolent
societies to receive and
hold bequests.

Robert Campbell

Jan 7 11th 1845
ref. to 6th J.

To the General Assembly of Virginia.

Your petitioners, members of various Christian churches, humbly represent, that they are less favored than other associations for public purposes, and their efforts in behalf of education and general benevolence greatly impeded, by being denied the corporate privilege of acquiring and holding property, and of entering into contracts. As Societies they can enter into no engagements that the law will recognize, and are incapable of holding property to any extent—a disability of which associations of our fellow-citizens for very many objects of secular enterprise, and even for purposes of mere amusement or diversion, have been relieved. They ask not that one denomination of Christians may be admitted to immunities withheld from others; belonging as they do, to the various denominations, their object is that the same liberal measure of impartial equality may be extended to all; and that they all may be favored with such legal sanctions, as that impediments which have hitherto obstructed their usefulness may be removed.

They need not stop to insist upon the importance of religious education. They are persuaded that your honorable body regard it as not only invaluable to one, and all of us, as immortal and accountable beings, but as involving the highest and best interests of the State. The duty of instructing the people in righteousness, temperance, and judgement to come, cannot be neglected, but at the infinite peril of those who are in authority.

What they desire to present prominently to your consideration is the fact, with which you are already familiar, that education is mainly directed and supported by the Church, under its various denominations, and that religious education is, and must be, dependant on the Church alone. Seeing this, how can it be expected that Societies condemned to perpetual poverty by the denial of the right to acquire property, and at the mercy of those who would take advantage of their defenceless condition, should have it in their power to establish and endow Schools commensurate with the growing wants and duties of the community? It is obviously not possible. Yet, enable them to hold what individual benevolence may desire to dedicate to the public through their agency, and award them the humblest privilege of appealing to the Courts to redress and prevent injustice, and the most formidable and blighting obstacle hitherto opposed to their earnest efforts will be removed, and the public will soon witness, as it will reap, the advantages of the beneficent measure.

And why, your petitioners humbly ask, should their application be objected to or opposed? They ask not for large or unusual powers, nor for privileges denied to other classes of their fellow-citizens; the benefits to result from the measure will redound to the whole community equally, and consist in the extension of order, peace and general intelligence and virtue; and they neither object to nor complain of any restrictions or power of supervision which the most watchful foresight may suggest as prudent or safe. It has, they know, been said, that there might be danger of a profuse beneficence in favor of religious objects, if Christian Societies were allowed to have and hold property; and others have objected that it might impair the foundations of our happy system of religious toleration.

These and all similar objections, they submit without fear, as to the result to your enlightened considerations to dispose of. The objection that Christian Societies may prove too rich, if they are placed under the protection of law, would seem to originate in a spirit of mockery and derision; but if there be those who are really apprehensive of such a result, they hope the consideration will banish their fears, that it belongs to you to assign a limit to the possessions of the Church, and that your petitioners will cheerfully acquiesce in any limit which will not render their means below a competent provision for the cases they have in view. As to the other objections, they venture to surmise that it proceeds from indifference to all Christian denominations, rather than a desire that they, or any of them should do well. The extension of equal immunities to all is not less consistent with universal toleration than a course of indiscriminate indifference and neglect, and is recommended by inducements which cannot fail of their influence with a paternal government.

The corporate privileges which your petitioners solicit of your honorable body, are important in other aspects than their bearing on the great work of education. The support of their ministry, the provision they desire to make for the destitute, the unprotected and bereaved of their several communions, the preservation of their houses of worship, create obligations which they are incapable of duly fulfilling in their present cast and friendless legal condition. Yet not only is there the most entire harmony between their interest and that of the community at large, in these several particulars, but the whole community is deep-

ly concerned in supplying them with every facility which may assist in the faithful execution of their important trust.

Your petitioners have not designed to do more than to intimate, in a general way, the grounds on which they hope to be relieved of the disabilities under which they labor, and to be placed on a footing of equality with other associations of their fellow-citizens. Their own solemn conviction is, that the well being of the State and society at large, is involved in this application; and that not religion only, but that the prosperity and morals of our common country will suffer, greatly suffer, by its failure.

Our good Commonwealth stands almost if not quite alone, among her sister States, in the neglect of the interesting and just claims of Christian Societies. In the other States, almost without exception, they have extended to their Churches the privileges which we solicit for our own; and every where experience has demonstrated that the measure was not only safe and harmless, but wise and just.

We pray you to obliterate a peculiarity, so derogatory to our own renowned Commonwealth, and to grant the relief demanded by so many considerations, sacred and politic.

The whose names are subscribed Citizens of Bedford County, Campbell
in adopting the above petition respectfully request that its
prayer may be granted—

Wm Radford
Elisha Peters
Hector Harris
Wm Don
E. S. Hobbs

Nicholas L Davies
H. Marbury—
Edmund Cobbs
Bry. Disgentone
John A. Swiftwick

Frederick Hake	Archibald Bolling
John Mullock	John North
John C. Cobb	Wm B. Leffew
James T. Merivether	R. C. Steple
William Cobb	Gerard. Pleasant
Harvey Mitchell	Joseph W. Feats
E. Hutter	<u>Wm. Ward</u>
J. J. Wyke	Harland Dindexter
Ornackowridge Cox	Mr. A. Wharton
John W. Schenk	Samuel Dindexter Jr
James McCofer	Mr. Crossman
James C. Hargraves	Ben. Almonster
Wm. A. Merivether	La. Wilson
Hiram Cheatum	Samuel A. Clay
Mayo Davies	
Thos. H. Scott	
Nat. W. Hays	
Paulus E. Harrison	
Benj. J. Davis	