

## From the Danbury Baptist Association

*The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 35: 1 August to 30 November 1801*  
(Princeton University Press, 2008), 407-9

SIR,

[after 7 Oct. 1801]

Among the many millions in America and Europe who rejoice in your Election to office; we embrace the first opportunity which we have enjoy'd in our collective capacity, since your Inauguration, to express our great satisfaction, in your appointment to the chief Magistracy in the United States: And though our mode of expression may be less courtly and pompous than what many others clothe their addresses with, we beg you, Sir to believe, that none are more sincere.

Our Sentiments are uniformly on the side of Religious Liberty—That Religion is at all times and places a Matter between God and Individuals—That no man ought to suffer in Name, person or effects on account of his religious Opinions—That the legitimate Power of civil Government extends no further than to punish the man *who works ill to his neighbour*: But Sir, our constitution of government is not specific. Our antient charter, together with the Laws made coincident therewith, were adopted as the Basis of our government, At the time of our revolution; and such had been our Laws & usages, & such still are; that religion is consider'd as the first object of Legislation; & therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights: and these favors we receive at the expence of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistant with the rights of freemen. It is not to be wondred at therefore; if those, who seek after *power & gain* under the pretence of *government & Religion* should reproach their fellow men—should reproach their chief Magistrate, as an enemy of religion Law & good order because he will not, dares not assume the prerogative of Jehovah and make Laws to govern the Kingdom of Christ.

Sir, we are sensible that the President of the united States, is not the national Legislator, & also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the Laws of each State; but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved President, which have had such genial Effect already,

like the radiant beams of the Sun, will shine & prevail through all these States and all the world till Hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the Earth. Sir when we reflect on your past services, and see a glow of philanthropy and good will shining forth in a course of more than thirty years we have reason to believe that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of State out of that good will which he bears to the Millions which you preside over. May God strengthen you for the arduous task which providence & the voice of the people have cal'd you to sustain and support you in your Administration against all the predetermin'd opposition of those who wish to rise to wealth & importance on the poverty and subjection of the people

And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you at last to his Heavenly Kingdom throug Jesus Christ our Glorious Mediator.

Signed in behalf of the Association

NEHH. DODGE

EPHM. ROBBINS

STEPHEN S NELSON

The Committee

RC (DLC); in Dodge's hand, signed by all; at head of text: "The address of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut; assembled October 7th. 1801. To *Thomas Jefferson* Esqr: President of the united States of America"; endorsed by TJ as received 30 Dec. and so recorded in SJL.

A Baptist elder in Connecticut, Nehemiah Dodge began his career in the ministry in Hampton in 1788 before moving on to Southington. He published many tracts and orations and fought for disestablishment. About 1820, upon becoming a Universalist, he served as pastor of the Universalist Church in New London. Stephen S. Nelson was a graduate of Rhode Island College and moved from Hartford to Mt. Pleasant, New York, in 1801 to become principal of an academy (William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, 2 vols. [Cambridge, Mass., 1971], 2:930, 987, 1008).

OUR COLLECTIVE CAPACITY: the Danbury Baptist Association was organized in 1790 and consisted of twenty-six churches, mostly in western Connecticut, but including three churches in eastern New York. At its October 1800 meeting, the association initiated a petition movement to redress the grievances of the dissenting minority against the Congregationalist majority in the region. Although disestablishment had not been an issue in the 1800 election in Connecticut, the movement was a call for the statewide repeal of all laws that could be understood as supporting an established religion. In 1801, the petition movement tried to remain above partisan politics and cultivated support of some Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and other dissenters who might be sympathetic to their cause. On 8 Oct. 1801, the Danbury Baptist Association, meeting at Colebrook, Connecticut, voted that Elders Stephen Royce (Stratfield), Daniel Wildman (Wolcott and Bristol), Nehemiah Dodge (Southington and Farmington), Stephen S. Nelson (Hartford) and

Deacons Jared Mills (Simsbury) and Ephraim Robbins (Hartford) “be a committee to prepare an address to the President of the United States, in behalf of this association.” The address and the president’s reply of 1 Jan. 1802 were reprinted in newspapers across the country, including Denniston and Cheetham’s *American Citizen* on 18 Jan. 1802 (*Minutes of the Danbury Baptist Association, Holden at Colebrook, October 7 and 8, 1801; Together with Their Circular and Corresponding Letters* [Hartford, 1801]; Shaw-Shoemaker, No. 109; McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 2:920, 985-988, 1004-5; *Connecticut Courant*, 25 May 1801).