

Where Liberty Was Born

Samuel Davies, the Morris Reading Room & Patrick Henry: A Linked Resource Guide to the Hanover Dissenters

The story of religious liberty in colonial Virginia begins in Hanover County. In the 1740s, a brick mason named Samuel Morris began gathering neighbors in his home to read Scripture and the published sermons of George Whitefield. That gathering outgrew his house and became the Morris Reading Room—one of the first non-Anglican meeting places licensed in Virginia. When the young Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies arrived, he transformed these reading houses into a settled congregation at Polegreen and became the first dissenting minister licensed in the colony. Among those who worshipped there was a boy named Patrick Henry, who later credited Davies as the greatest orator he ever heard. The resources below trace how these figures—Morris, Davies, and Henry—are bound together through the Hanover dissenters and Historic Polegreen Church.

Each title below is a clickable link.

The Hanover Dissenters & Polegreen: The Larger Story

- [Historic Polegreen Church — “Our Story”](#) — The Foundation’s own narrative, framing Morris’s home Bible readings as the beginning of Virginia’s religious freedom movement and the origin of the four licensed reading houses.
- [Historic Polegreen Church \(Hanover Meeting House\) — Clio](#) — Recounts Morris being fined and ordered before a Williamsburg court in 1743, where the dissenters won permission to build four reading houses—three in Hanover, one in Henrico.
- [The Ghost Church in Mechanicsville — Atlas Obscura](#) — Identifies Morris’s home readings as the start of the Hanover dissenters, who challenged the state-sanctioned Anglican church when doing so risked jail.

Samuel Davies

- [Samuel Davies \(1723–1761\) — Encyclopedia Virginia](#) — The most authoritative reference entry: his Hanover County ministry, his role in the Great Awakening, and how his rhetorical style influenced the young Patrick Henry.
- [Samuel Davies — Log College Press](#) — Digitized primary sources: Davies’s sermons, poems, letters, and toleration writings.
- [Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia \(Pilcher\) — Internet Archive](#) — Full text of the standard scholarly biography, free to borrow.

- [Dictionary of Virginia Biography — Davies source list](#) — A ready-made bibliography of the primary and scholarly sources on Davies.

Patrick Henry's Connection to Polegreen & Davies

- [Samuel Davies, Patrick Henry, and the Gospel of Liberty — PCUSA Historical Society](#) — The best single piece on the Davies–Henry link, tracing how Henry's lifelong support for dissent began with his family's conversion under Davies and his admiration of Davies's preaching.
- [Evangelism in Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" Speech — We're History](#) — Recounts the family tradition that Sarah Henry made twelve-year-old Patrick repeat Davies's sermons, and that Henry called Davies the "greatest orator he ever heard."
- [Hanover Presbytery \(1755\): Samuel Davies and Patrick Henry — Presbyterian Outlook](#) — Describes Henry's Anglican family taking him to hear Davies and having him replicate the discourses afterward—shaping his rhetorical skill.
- [The Fiery Patrick Henry — Law & Liberty](#) — Places Henry's religious-liberty advocacy in context, noting his mother joined Davies's Presbyterian church during the First Great Awakening.
- [Patrick Henry's Historic Polegreen Church — Christian Heritage](#) — A site-focused piece tying Henry directly to Polegreen and explaining how Davies turned Morris's reading houses into a full church.

A note on sources

These are accessible, public-facing resources suitable for visitors, docents, and general research. For formal grant or academic citation, the most rigorous treatments appear in George William Pilcher's *Samuel Davies: Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia* (University of Tennessee Press, 1971) and Rhys Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (UNC Press, 1982).