

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#95 • Season 3 • Episode 34

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Jefferson's Wall

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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Jefferson's Wall

#95 - Season 3; Episode 34

5/13/2026

Host: Jim

| Jim explores some of the origins of Thomas Jefferson's famed "Wall of Separation," back to that notorious marriage of church and state by Henry VIII.

[Music]

JIM: This begins as a fairy tale of sorts, you know,

Boy meets girl.

Boy and girl fall in love.

Boy and girl get married.

Girl is found to be with child, but fails to produce a male offspring suitable as the heir to the throne of England.

Boy wants a divorce.

It's a tale as old as time.

Actually, this tale is about five hundred years old, for it was in 1527 that Henry VIII first asked Pope Clement VII to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon because she failed to produce a male heir. The Pope refused, which led to a split and then some excommunications and some wars, both civil and revolutionary, and some - actually many - executions, by beheading, or burning at the stake, or hanging and drawing and quartering - you know, people just generally not getting along. One thing led to another, and our journey eventually arrives at Thomas Jefferson's famed Wall of Separation, our topic for today. To make this journey make sense, I have to connect a few dots, which I'll do just after this music.

[Music]

2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the United States of America, our semi-quincentennial year, as no one is calling it. We at **Making Our Way** wish to mark this sacred/secular occasion with a few insights and reflections. Today, we're making our way to Thomas Jefferson's storied Wall of Separation.

And I begin with this question. Have you ever made a rubbing of an engraved surface? You know, place a paper over the surface and rub with a pencil or charcoal to record the image? It's what Indiana Jones did in *The Last Crusade* when he recorded a Latin inscription that was engraved on a medieval knight's shield.

Or if you've ever visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D. C. , you've likely seen someone making a rubbing of one of the names carved there, a loved one fallen in the war.

I once visited the London Brass Rubbing Centre. It's in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Parish Church at Trafalgar Square. They have replicas of brass plates from memorials and monuments, and visitors are invited to make rubbings of them, for a fee, as mementos of their visit. And I chose a brass plaque with a familiar name on it, Isabella Boleyn.

Isabella Boleyn was the great aunt of Anne Boleyn, the famous "Anne of the Thousand Days" Boleyn, the girl who caught Henry VIII's eye when his wife Catherine of Aragon, his first of many wives, was having difficulty producing a viable male child. She had given birth to a daughter, Mary, her only child out of six to survive infancy. But Henry insisted on a male heir, so he appealed to the Church of Rome for an annulment, but Pope Clement VII refused.

A couple of reasons. First, Henry's marriage to Catherine had required special papal consent in the first place, because Catherine was the widow of Henry's older brother Arthur, and there are some Bible passages somewhere about these things. So, papal infallibility being what it is, Pope Clement did not want to annul something his predecessor, Pope Julius II, had sanctioned. Plus, Pope Clement had made an alliance with France, drawing the unwelcome attention of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Some of his troops, exceeding their orders, had actually sacked Rome, leaving the Pope in a precarious position, and he didn't want to upset the emperor any further, and Emperor Charles just happened to be Catherine of Aragon's nephew. So, no annulment for Henry.

Henry took this snub about as well as you'd expect an autocrat to do. He broke with the Church of Rome, formed the Church of England, and made himself its supreme head instead, which meant 1533 saw the official marriage of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and 1534 saw the official marriage of Church and State, and each marriage had an inevitable outcome. Heads rolled.

Henry began operating under the divine right theory of kings. He answered to no one, neither asked nor needed permission from anyone for anything, and doled out favors and punishments by whim. His was a reign of complete self-interest, and the wall of separation was nowhere in sight.

So Protestantism came to England, and with it the persecution of Catholics. And this continued under Henry's son and successor, Edward VI, son of Henry's third wife Jane Seymour. After Edward came Lady Jane Grey, who was Queen for nine days, or, as she is known today, the Nine Days Queen. Her only contribution to the political scene was as a political pawn in a fight that brought Queen Mary I to the throne.

This was Mary, daughter of Catherine, who used her divine right to force England back to Catholicism, and the force she exerted earned her the nickname Bloody Mary.

Then came her half-sister Elizabeth I and Boleyn's daughter, who used divine right to force England right back to Protestantism. Elizabeth was at first somewhat tolerant of the Catholics, but that changed when Pope Pius V excommunicated her and released all Catholics from any allegiance to her. So, by divine right, religious persecutions returned to England and continued under Elizabeth's successor, James VI and I. This is the James of King James Bible fame.

We next welcome James's son and successor, Charles I, to the throne. Charles fully embraced divine right kingship. He also fully embraced Henrietta Maria of France, a Catholic, taking her as his wife, and proclaiming her queen by royal decree. Now not all wished the new couple well, least of all the Protestant Puritans, so called because they wished to purify England and her church of all traces of Catholic theology and practice. Charles met their opposition with fines, loss of position, imprisonment, and banishment, forcing many Puritans to seek their freedom and fortune elsewhere. During the years 1620 to 1640, about 20,000 Puritans left Old England to cross the Atlantic to New England, forming Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The New World likewise welcomed many groups seeking a new start in a new land, free from centuries of European religious war. Catholics settled mostly in Maryland. Anglicans went to Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Baptists would settle in Rhode Island. Quakers in Pennsylvania. And being an open and tolerant group, Quakers also welcomed Moravians, Mennonites, Amish, Presbyterians, Jews, Catholics, Huguenots, and Lutherans, and with plenty of land and with room to spare, regardless of what the native population might have thought, and with the horrors of religious conflict now safely an ocean away, a true fairy tale would end here with, "They all lived happily ever after."

But this is not boy meets girl. This is civil power meets religious authority, and our New World paradise is about to become an all-too-familiar tale as old as time.

Puritans had sought freedom of religion, yes, but freedom for whom exactly? They believed their congregations represented the one and only true faith, and under their rule the divine right of kings was transformed into the divine right of Puritans. Massachusetts Bay Colony became a theocracy. Civil laws favored their Congregationalist theology, morality, and church organization. Persecutions that had once targeted the Puritans in Old England were now targeted against non-Puritans in New England. Again, no wall of separation in sight, but we do meet some one who is about to change all that: Roger Williams.

He was a Puritan minister who could not abide this coupling of church and State. His sermons and activities against religious authoritarianism so threatened the authorities that they sought his arrest. Williams either fled or was forced out of Massachusetts Bay Colony, and headed, well, where? Back to England? Not there. He relied instead on the Narragansett and the Wapanoag people with whom he had nurtured a mutual respect. Williams had traded with them, had learned their language and had argued that this land was their land, and that the English crown had no claim over it without fair purchase by reciprocal agreement. They assisted his escape from Massachusetts to his settlement on land that would become Providence, Rhode Island, at the fair price of friendship.

There, in 1638, he established the first Baptist Church in North America. Williams compared the church to a vineyard, using language from Isaiah, and noted that in biblical times when people began to mix the sacred and the secular, God was not pleased. Here is what Williams wrote to another Puritan minister, John Cotton. Quoting,

"When they opened a gap in the hedge, or wall of separation, between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world, God always broke down the wall and made his garden a wilderness. As at this day. If God is ever pleased to restore his garden and paradise again, it must of necessity be peculiarly walled in from the world unto himself."

For William's mixing church and state made a wilderness of both. To prevent this, Williams sought and received from King Charles II a charter for self-governance that made Rhode Island the first truly secular government in world history. Rhode Island enacted a strict separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, democratic self-governments, and no divine right of anybody. They welcomed not only Baptists, but also Quakers, Jews, atheists, Catholics, anyone seeking safe haven for religious or non-religious leanings.

But we're not at "happily ever after" just yet.

Fast forward to 1801, by which time Thomas Jefferson had written both the Declaration of Independence and the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. The Constitutional Convention had produced the United States of America, the world's first secular *national* government. And its First Congress had ratified the Bill of Rights.

Also, by 1801, the world had witnessed a smooth constitutional transition of government in this new nation from one presidency to another, and then to a third, not by sedition, or insurrection, or revolution, or execution, but by law, and by the will of the people, a tradition that lasted 224 years, 1 month, and 29 days.

And also by 1801, Baptists had grown beyond the secular safety of Rhode Island into neighboring Connecticut, where their religious liberties were threatened. So in 1801, the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, sat down and wrote President Jefferson a letter, which began as follows:

"Sir,

"Among the many millions in America and Europe who rejoice in your election to office, we embrace the first opportunity which we have enjoyed in our collective capacity, since your inauguration, to express our great satisfaction in your appointment to the Chief Magistracy in the United States"

Then they brought to Jefferson's attention their concern. The Connecticut legislature, they reported, had made religious liberty less of an inalienable right and more a matter of favors granted. But the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, were not in fear of losing their rights to a secular civil government, but to a theocratic government. In other words, the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, were in fear of losing their rights to the Congregationalists of Danbury, Connecticut. It was Baptists versus Congregationalists, one religious group against another. Yes, tale as old as time.

On New Year's Day, 1802, came Jefferson's reply, quoting,

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence, that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature would 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and state."

There it is, a Wall of Separation, and as we've seen, a wall the bricks of which were formed and fired in centuries of religious conflagration. A wall that both prohibits and protects. Clear. Concise.

In 1992, in George Washington's hometown of Alexandria, Virginia, I sat in my office, where I served as pastor for the Salvation Army Church. "Lieutenant James Cheyne," a short-lived honor. There I received from the city of Alexandria an invitation to bring the invocation at a city council meeting. First thought? Where is that wall of separation now?

Personally, I was ill at ease mingling a sectarian prayer with a secular government function. I still am. But they weren't inviting Jim Cheyne to pray. They were inviting the officer in charge. The Salvation Army just happened to be next up on their rotational schedule, So I complied, and standing in the chamber, with the broadcast camera not six feet away, staring me down, I offered the least sectarian prayer I could think of. Fifteen seconds tops. Shorter than they were used to. The "amen" caught many council members still sneaking into their seats.

Not far from Alexandria is Monticello, Jefferson's home and site of his grave. A granite monolith marks the spot, and on it are engraved, at Jefferson's direction, the three achievements for which he wished to be remembered.

*Author of the Declaration of Independence
of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom
and Father of the University of Virginia.*

Nothing about being president. The grave is surrounded not by a wall but an iron fence, so I was unable to make a rubbing of that remarkable engraving.

Those words, "wall of separation," are not in the Constitution, as those who are eager to breach it will tell you.

But read the Declaration of Independence. The wall is there.

Read the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. The wall is there, too.

Read the First Amendment. It is there.

Read the Constitution itself, a secular document, where the wall of separation looms so large you cannot see so much as a sliver of religion behind it.

To Jefferson, to the founders, and in the spirit of our founding, the individual conscience is that sacred space neither government nor religion should ever breach.

So Jefferson writes, "legislative powers of government reach actions only and not opinions."

And he writes, "Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself. She is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error and has nothing to fear from the conflict."

And the one that always makes me smile? "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

So, let's retrace our steps. Jefferson's wall of separation between church and state is the same as that on which Roger Williams founded Rhode Island, which was made in the reaction to the religious persecution enacted by Puritans in Massachusetts, to which they had fled because of persecution against Puritans in England, where Catholics and

Protestants took divine-right turns to persecute each other, caused by the split of the Church of England from the Church of Rome, because Henry VIII wanted a divorce so he could marry Anne Boleyn.

It all comes down to Anne Boleyn.

There, I've connected the dots, but just before "happily ever after," there's one more detail.

Anne Boleyn was, as noted at the start, the grandniece of Isabella Boleyn. And it was Isabella Boleyn's memorial plaque I found in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the-Fields at Trafalgar Square.

Except her name was not Isabella Boleyn. Yes, that was her name at birth, but then she married a man named William Cheyne. William Cheyne of the Isle of Sheppy.

Now, would it really be too much of a stretch to suggest the wall of separation, and yes, even the First Amendment to the Constitution itself are the direct results of my ancestors, the Cheynes?

Well, sure, when you put it that way, it sounds ridiculous.

[Music]

If, however, at this, our nation's 250th birthday, you feel inclined to celebrate liberty and religious freedom by, oh, clicking the like and subscribe buttons on our YouTube channel? Well, that could be the happy ending we've all been waiting for.

Thank you for your company today.

Until next time.

[Music ends]