“Bleeding Liberty”: Patriotic Violence in Revolutionary Virginia

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MA History Thesis

2024

Acknowledgements

I would foremost like to thank my advisors Nicole Eustace and Rebecca Goetz for their advice, feedback, and support throughout this process. Many thanks also to John Shovlin for his kindness and pragmatism, Susanah Shaw Romney for her enthusiasm and encouragement, and Andrew Lipman for giving me a job. I also benefited greatly from the intellectual community nurtured weekly at the NYU Atlantic History Workshop. To Brett Voyles and Francesca Seni Pardo, thank you for your friendship, and for reading more drafts of this paper than either I or you care to count. Finally, I thank my dad, Paul Hullinger, for his wholehearted support of my history education, for reading the books that I read, and for teaching me how to change my mind.

In September of 1775, a company of self-directed, lower-class "volunteer patriots" kidnapped Williamsburg, Virginia, resident Joshua Hardcastle. The imperial crisis—North American colonists' conflict with British Parliament over colonial governance—was raging, and anti-British patriots took it upon themselves to quash dissenting voices, by violent means if necessary. According to the volunteers, Hardcastle was "guilty of uttering expressions highly degrading the good people who compose the several companies now in this place." On September 9th, John Pinkney of *The Virginia Gazette* published an apologetic notice to his "Gentlemen" audience that "I am compelled by the officers of the volunteer companies to transmit you a copy of the paragraph" describing the incident.[1]

The paragraph that followed recounted Hardcastle's "trial." He had apparently voiced concerns about the character and activities of the self-identified patriots who filled out the ranks of Virginia's volunteer military companies in the months after the Royal Governor Dunmore caused a stir by confiscating the colonists' gunpowder cache in Williamsburg. The volunteers, "exasperated at this insulting behaviour, and thinking themselves bound, by the ties of honour and love of country" to retaliate, "waited on" Hardcastle and "conducted him to the Grove (the habitation of the soldiers)." There, in the swampy woods on the outskirts of Williamsburg, they carried out what the officers described to Pinkney as a "candid, mature, and deliberate" trial during which Hardcastle was found guilty; of what precise charge is unclear. In attributing their actions to "honour and love of country," the volunteers asserted that democratic, popular violence had a place under the banner of the ethos that colonists called "patriotism."[2]

The company compelled Hardcastle to apologize not only to the officers, but also to the crowd of middling volunteers acting independently of Virginia's elite patriot leaders. The

[1] "Mess. Dixon & Hunter," *The Virginia Gazette*, September 9, 1775.
[2] "Mess. Dixon & Hunter," *The Virginia Gazette*, September 9, 1775.

company had originally voted to decide whether he should be drummed through the streets of Williamsburg or forced to make a public concession, but the vote tied, and the men settled on forcing Hardcastle to "ask pardon of all the officers and soldiers present [...] and also be published in the Virginia gazettes, as a warning to those who may hereafter sport with the great and glorious cause of America."[3] Hardcastle would pay for his slight against the common people. He published his own notice in the *Gazette* on the same day the account of his trial ran. The notice ran directly beneath the kidnapping story and read simply, "I intend to leave the colony soon."[4]

The volunteers' actions remind us that patriotism in the late eighteenth century was inextricable from rhetorical and actual violence. The imperial crisis in Virginia brought conversations about the parameters of patriotic violence to the forefront of a Williamsburg-based print culture in the 1770s. For the first half of the decade, these debates hinged on the issue of class. Virginia functioned as something of a three-tiered society in which the right to violence sharply delineated the top and bottom tiers. The bottom tier comprised enslaved Blacks denied any right to violence; at the top were elite whites considered entitled to violence as a prerogative of their high status. Ordinary whites occupied an uncertain place in the middle.[5] Virginians agreed that there was a link between a love of liberty and a willingness to fight for it, but contestation emerged around the question of who could or should conduct patriotic violence, and how. Elites made connections between patriotism and violence in print and eventually supported

[3] "Mess. Dixon & Hunter," *The Virginia Gazette*, September 9, 1775.
[4] Joshua Hardcastle, "I intend to leave the colony soon," *The Virginia Gazette*, September 9, 1775. Little is known about Joshua Hardcastle other than his status as a Williamsburg resident. Hardcastle's name appears only briefly in the Virginia sources; his occupation is unclear, though he appears to have been in debt to the William Hays estate upon Hays' death. His only notable traces in the record after September 1775 are from two bizarre subsequent notices that he published in the *Virginia Gazette*, both nearly identical to the one cited here. Having apparently not left the colony by 1776, Hardcastle wrote, ""I EXPECT to leave this Continent within ten Days from the Date hereof." Then, in 1777, he published again: "I intend to leave the Country immediately."
[5] Thanks to Nicole Eustace for this gloss.

organized military resistance against Britain, but they spent much of the revolutionary period fearing the implications of patriotic violence conducted by the informally armed and organized lower classes. Violent lower-class patriots had the potential to threaten both the patriot movement and elite control of the colony itself. Meanwhile, ordinary white Virginians cared little about preserving the appearance of colonial civility and harbored few reservations about destabilizing elite leadership and status. Virginians did not separate patriotism from violence either conceptually or in practice, but much to the disquiet of elites, ordinary Virginians considered patriotism a legitimate banner under which to wage unsupervised popular violence. These disagreements came to an abrupt end only after Lord Dunmore issued an emancipation proclamation for Black people enslaved to patriot masters in late 1775, offering freedom and arms to those who joined his forces. In that moment, class-based debates about patriotism subordinated to racial solidarity that reaffirmed a long-standing white monopoly on violence.

The divide in Virginia's patriot movement, though eventually resolved, raises questions about the link between patriotism, class, and violence. Violence was a generally accepted tool of colonial American politics, but that does not mean that colonists agreed on when, how, why, or who could use it. Whether violence had a place at all in early American life was not in question. Colonial mobs often assembled with the tacit support of the elite, who recognized the political and social utility of sanctioning direct action in certain contexts. Elites observing the imperial crisis recognized the necessity of "brandishing the stronger passions of the people."[6] Mob actions also allowed elites who did not participate to make a show of standing above the fray, demonstrating civility supposedly lacking in the ordinary classes.[7] Elite performances of gentility

[6] Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 372-373.
[7] Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution*, 387.

necessitated separating belief and action; they frequently struck poses of disapproval toward mob actions while understanding that violence was a formidable political weapon against grievances that sometimes overlapped class boundaries. Elites viewed public demonstrations of violence as an acceptable method of keeping order while also allowing the ordinary classes a catharsis of discontent.[8] Few colonists believed that violence always violated the order imposed by the social contract.

However, class-based disagreements about how to enact violent resistance in the context of the imperial crisis initially compromised a united patriot movement in Virginia, where scholars have granted less attention to popular organizing than the hotbeds of patriotism in the New England colonies. Revolutionary Virginia long appeared to scholars as almost inexplicably united in favor of the patriot movement despite vertiginous race and class distinctions.[9] Historians challenging the apparent consensus draw attention to the opposition that ordinary people mounted to elite interpretations of Virginia's place in the imperial crisis. Woody Holton and Michael McDonnell are among those who have revealed that class conflict made the patriot movement in Revolutionary Virginia far more tumultuous and hostile than once thought.[10]

Despite their distrust of patriot leaders, ordinary people coordinated popular resistance against British sympathizers, indicating their support for patriotic values, if not those who led the cause. This article considers the word "patriot" as both a political term referring to the organized rejection of British rule (often helmed by elites) and as an eighteenth-century ethos that

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[8] Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the development of American opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 5.
[9] Works suggesting a "consensus" view of Revolutionary Virginia include John E. Selby's *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783* (Charlottesville: 1988) and Rhys Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia*, 1750-1790 (Chapel Hill: 1982).
[10] Michael A. McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, Class, and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 46; Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1999), xvii.

encouraged good citizens to protect liberty and the common good (a standard that any white man could achieve).[11] Virginia's middling sorts formed a popular patriot movement that coalesced around the latter definition. This movement was formidable: Woody Holton points out that the Virginia gentry, who made up just ten percent of the colony's population, nurtured concerns about the efficacy of "middling class" Virginians at dragging the colony into anti-imperial politics by organizing independently of the self-declared leaders.[12] In crucial moments, conceptions of patriotism diverged along class lines, sparking debates that hobbled early revolutionary mobilization efforts.

A note on classification is necessary before delving into the relationship between elites, ordinary people, and patriotic violence. I include Virginia merchants in my definition of elite patriots despite their material dissimilarities to the great planters who made up the gentry class. My reasoning comes from the primary sources, which (as we will see) tend to group merchants with the elite when it comes to the targeted animosity of the lower classes. Property ownership and facilities with commercial networks distinguished the elite from the ordinary. Some historiography imagines a rift between merchants and planters in Revolutionary Virginia, but recent scholarship reveals that the interests of the two overlapped far more than they clashed. Some planters indeed supported trade boycotts to avoid paying debts to merchants; however, James Fitcher points out in "Collecting Debts: Virginia Merchants, the Continental Association, and the Meetings of November 1774" that financial resistance to Great Britain supported both "planter-debtor" and "merchant-lender" interests. Nonexportation agreements mandated the

[11] Scholars typically capitalize "Patriot" as it refers to those who resisted British rule in some capacity. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to use the lowercase initial in all cases in order to avoid making arbitrary judgements about whether the primary sources use the word to refer to the political context of the imperial crisis or to describe a broader, older identification of those who loved liberty.

[12] Holton, *Forced Founders*, xvii; Douglas Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30.

closure of Virginia's courts and the halting of debt collection to protect planters who owed money but could no longer sell tobacco to their usual markets. Fitcher argues that the closures, and therefore the boycotts, offered a boon for merchants, many of whom were debtors themselves and jumped at the excuse to "disguise cautious nonlending as patriotic nonimportation."[13]

The financial interests of Virginia's elite distinguished their patriotism from that of the popular classes, who lacked commercial connections and owned few or no wealth-generating assets, including the bodies and labor of enslaved people. Property ownership was the apotheosis of liberty; propertied, commercially agile elites thus saw themselves as possessing a preponderance of patriotism over the middling sorts. However, the overlap between planters and merchants did not stop at financial interests. Wealthy families intermarried, and many planters were also merchants.[14] Merchants may not have been genteel by the standards of the planter class, but they were a world away from the white laborers, renters, landless farmers, and fishermen who filled out the ranks of the popular patriot movement. Virginia was a society stratified by class as well as freedom and unfreedom.

As the imperial crisis gestated in Virginia's slave-owning planter society, the patriotic violence associated with the mass organizing of the Revolutionary era acquired potent racial and class implications.[15] Merchants and planter-class patriots worried that demonstrations by ordinary patriots would reflect the seemingly debased character of the lower classes, a concern that Tory observers deftly exploited. As long as the debates about violence remained centered on

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[13] James Fitcher, "Collecting Debts: Virginia Merchants, the Continental Association, and the Meetings of November 1774," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 130, no. 3: 173 (2022), 182-188.
[14] Fitcher, "Collecting Debts: Virginia Merchants, the Continental Association, and the Meetings of November 1774," 182-188.
[15] Christopher Waldrep and Michael Bellesile, *Documenting American Violence: A Sourcebook* (Cary: Oxford University Press 2006), 71-72; Holger Hoock, *Scars of Independence: America's Violent Birth* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 29-33.

white Virginians in the imperial crisis, elites would not—and *could* not—openly support the violent patriotism of the lower classes for fear that it might pose a risk to their property and safety. However enthusiastically Virginia's elites endorsed patriotic violence in print, they preferred that ordinary people not take them at their word.

However, while class-based disagreements about the use of violence precipitated the emergence of two patriotic movements in Virginia, white racial solidarity eventually won ordinary patriots to the elite-led patriot cause. An assortment of factors determined Virginian support for anti-imperial resistance, including a variety of economic concerns, expansionist aspirations, and fear that the fate of Boston would soon become the fate of all the colonies, but for whites, fear, distrust, and contempt of enslaved people ran deeper than all of these. White racial solidarity transcended the boundaries of class. "The most powerful weapons in the colonial cultural arsenal," Robert Parkinson writes, were "stereotypes, prejudices, expectations, and fears about Indians and Africans."[16] White solidarity in Revolutionary Virginia coalesced amid the response to Lord Dunmore's Proclamation. In 1775, Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, declared martial law in the colony and offered freedom to any servant or enslaved person willing to take up arms against their patriot masters, threatening the propertied and racial order. Elite fears of white mobs paled in comparison to the nightmare of all white Virginians: a slave revolt.

Virginia elites in the 1770s began a print discussion about what it meant to be a lover of liberty during the imperial crisis. These sources—primarily newspapers and letters—reveal the inseparable connections between violence, patriotism, and slavery. The swift unification of the colony's two patriot movements in 1775 may seem sudden, but disagreements about the kinds of

[16] Parkinson declines to conflate what he calls "stereotypes" with race in the Revolutionary period. I add to Parkinson's argument by explicitly attributing unification in Virginia to white racial solidarity. Robert Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 21.

allowable violence were actually the deviation, not the norm, in a slave society predicated upon a white monopoly on violence. Class-based conflicts of course existed, but white solidarity ordinarily soothed intra-racial enmity. All agreed that violence by enslaved Black people was so taboo that it was not even a permissible subject for debate. Enslaved people seizing not only freedom but arms in the wake of Dunmore's emancipation proclamation moved the two patriot movements to unite out of a desire to preserve the structure of violence that enabled slavery. All whites understood that patriotism, the defense and love of one's liberty, required a willingness to commit violence. What we learn from examining discussions about patriotic violence before and after Dunmore's Proclamation is that the patriotic defense of white liberty was synonymous with the violence of enslavement. Put differently: Virginia's slave society embodied the colony's version of the patriotic ideal.

Reflecting on the complicated legacies of the American Revolution, historian Bernard Bailyn wrote in 1992 that colonists even early in the revolutionary period were alert to the "obvious discrepancy" between the colonies' enslavement of some 500,000 Black people and patriots' professed love of liberty. What Bailyn identified as a "contradiction between the proclaimed principles of freedom and the facts of life in America" prompted a reckoning with slavery that provided the vocabulary and ideological foundations for abolition movements in the incipient republic.[17] Faced with the incongruity between their words and their actions, he pointed out, even southern enslavers like Patrick Henry came to recognize the hypocrisy of American patriotism, if only rhetorically. The years during and after the Revolution saw an enormous increase in legal manumissions. Most northern colonies-turned-states put some form of abolition on the books by 1804. Abolitionist sentiments proliferated in the nineteenth century, as a

[17] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution: Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967), 233-235.

growing coalition of Americans sought to end an institution incompatible with the republic's founding revolution. Bailyn concluded that slavery "had been subjected to severe pressure as a result of the extension of Revolutionary ideas, and it bore the marks ever after."[18]

Bailyn was neither the first nor the last historian to see the patriots who led the American Revolution as ideological hypocrites who trumpeted the cause of liberty while holding others in bondage. Since he published *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* in 1967, a generation of scholars has reckoned with the questions he raised. Nor is Bailyn unique in suggesting that the Revolution augured a movement to revise the ideological discrepancies baked into the origins of the United States. A body of once-canonical work on the American Revolution interrogates the obvious paradox of why the freedom-minded founding generation preserved slavery during and after the Revolution.

However, straightforward efforts to address this issue presume that its fundamental assumption—that slavery contradicted the patriots' reverence for liberty—is true. In the case of the northern colonies, widely understood as societies-with-slaves rather than slave societies, there is a debate to be had. But in the South, that assumption does not hold. However successfully future abolitionists used the Revolution as a symbol of national hypocrisy, the reality was that southern patriots preserved the "peculiar institution" because they found no tension between the concurrent persistence of liberty and slavery. Indeed, the two constituted one another. Liberty, which Bailyn aptly described as the ability to "maintain one's just property in material things and abstract rights," was a violent struggle in a society that took for granted the fact that all men should want to be free but not all men could be, or should be.[19] Examining the complicated dynamics of the patriot movement in Virginia reveals sobering connections between

[18] Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 245.
[19] Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 233.

slavery, class, patriotism, and violence that help us identify consistency, not contradictions, in revolutionary-era ideologies.

A "COUNTRY OF PATRIOTS"

While contemporaries and historians alike have considered the New England colonies the heart of the patriot cause, Virginians viewed themselves as the locus of anti-imperial resistance and patriotism itself. By far the most populous of the thirteen colonies, Virginia produced vital revolutionary leaders and later became the site of the deciding battle of the Revolutionary War. Further, the distinctiveness of Virginia from New England prompts the question of what drew Virginians to the patriot cause. The ways in which Virginians understood American patriotism are thus crucial to our understanding of the concept and its historical import.

Newspapers like Williamsburg's multiple *Virginia Gazettes* offered elites a public platform to pontificate on what it meant to be a "true" patriot. Virginia merchants tended to be well-connected and valued associates of the upper classes, if not members themselves.[20] Alexander Purdie, publisher of one of the *Gazettes*, owned thirteen enslaved people when he died—more human property than roughly eighty-six percent of Williamsburg residents.[21] Printers did business with lawyers and merchants, and invested in various areas of the print business. In a colony where less than twenty-five percent of adult white residents possessed sufficient literacy to sign their own name, the newspaper provided a discursive space for elite readers and writers

[20] Richard Merritt, "Public Opinion in Colonial America: Content-Analyzing the Colonial Press," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1963), 360-361.
[21] In a city where enslaved people made up over fifty percent of the population, most white enslavers owned fewer than five enslaved people. Thad Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1965), 29, 41.

alike.[22] We can also assume that a wider range of colonists would have heard these newspapers read aloud in taverns and public houses.

A writer in the *Virginia Gazette* under the pseudonym Philo Homnius vaunted in 1770 that "while other countries boast of a patriot here and there, like scattering stars, Virginia is a country of patriots, and, like the milky way, is one constant unremitting glow of patriotism," an ebullition the author attributed to the affinity between the colonial legislature and the gentleman class.[23] Individual property-owning gentlemen and the deliberative legislative body mutually checked one another, ensuring that no man without a vested interest in the colony had a say in its operations. Referring to an early nonimportation agreement, Philo Hominus remarked, "How honourable and illustrious a *confederacy* was then formed between the *legislative body* (who gloriously rose as they nobly fell) and numerous *private Gentlemen* [...] save the torrering [*sic*] cause of *bleeding liberty*."[24] The essay in the *Gazette* claimed patriotism as a sentiment of the elite classes, placing gentlemen and the moderating force of the legislature at the vanguard of the patriot cause.

Restraint and moderation typified the model patriot, an imagined masculine type fashioned by gentlemen devoted to mimicking the aesthetics of British aristocracy in a colony where property ownership replaced noble birth as a status marker. The boundaries of this imagined type defined gentlemen as much as they used it to define those around them. Virginia gentlemen selectively applied ascetic values to their lavish plantation lives, including in personal relationships, religious habits, and understandings of violence. Discipline went hand-in-hand

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[22] By comparison, some scholars have estimated white male literacy rates in the New England colonies approached ninety percent by the eve of the Revolution. For more, see the work of Kenneth Lockridge. Rhys Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1976): 361.
[23] Philo Hominus [pseud], "THE REMEMBRANCER, No. 1," *The Virginia Gazette*, February 8, 1770. Philo Homnius could translate to "son of man" or "lover of man."
[24] Philo Hominus [pseud], "THE REMEMBRANCER, No. 1," *The Virginia Gazette*, February 8, 1770.

with the essential masculine traits of courage and valor in battle: the pinnacle of patriotic virtue.[25] Violence was not in and of itself savage; in fact, violence done right constituted an immanent feature of patriotism and white masculinity. The military's strict racial and organizational hierarchy legitimized violence committed by soldiers under the supervision of the state. Military service was at the heart of rational masculine violence. Virginians could thus conceive of Native men on the colony's frontier as both "savage" and effeminate for appearing to lack martial restraint.[26] Whites assumed that Africans possessed similar violent tendencies. Embodying this masculine type required abnegating the mobbish and irregular violence of the lower classes. Patriot elites faced the challenge of advocating for anti-imperial resistance without seeming to authorize mob violence that might threaten elite property and well-being as well as emasculate self-identified patriots.

The imagined patriot needed to rise above such immoderate influences as fame and the whims of the mob in order to best hold back the "overflowing oppression" of tyranny.[27] Planter John Randolph complained in a 1774 pamphlet that "I fear I was very much mistaken" to suppose he knew what constituted patriotism, for "I can by no Means denominate a Man a Patriot because he enjoys the Acclimations of the People." The pamphlet raised a common concern among observers of the Virginia patriot movement: that the ordinary classes might gain influence over the rightful elite leaders. Ordinary patriots lacked access to the civility formed by the alliance between the legislature and the gentlemen and tended to scorn organized military

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[25] Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003) 37. For more on colonial constructions of masculine gender, violence, and virtue, see Ashley Willard, *Engendering Islands: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Violence in the Early French Caribbean* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

[26] As Kathleen Brown puts it, "While English men depicted themselves as warriors capable of dominating a feminized population, Indian men and women initially refused to acknowledge these claims to military supremacy, treating the foreigners as they would subject peoples, cowards, or servants." Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 45.

[27] Philo Hominus [pseud], "THE REMEMBRANCER, No. 1," *The Virginia Gazette*, February 8, 1770.

service. Critical commentators warned that these flaws would not only degrade the patriot cause but endanger elites "who are running the Race of Popularity" by associating too closely with the patriotism of the ordinary classes. Randolph cautioned against the "Slavery of the popular Impulser" and warned that men who did not maintain distance from the lower sort might "mistake the Shouts of a Mob for the Trumpet of Fame."[28] A proper patriot must then rise above the vagaries of ordinary people.

An illustrative example of the imagined patriot comes from *The Virginia Almanack for the Year of Our Lord, 1771*, published in Williamsburg by William Rind, one of the three Williamsburg printers of the *Virginia Gazette*. The almanac contained meteorological and astronomical projections for the year 1771, as well as a variety of miscellaneous information, including parables, marriage advice, and anecdotes from around the colony. Readers ideally came away equipped with instructions on how best to practice virtue in the coming year. One parable recalled the courage of a Roman senator commanded by his emperor to "give his Voice against the interest of his Country" or face death. The senator, "conscious that the Attempt to serve a People was in his Power," responded that "My Virtue is in my own Disposal" and "if I fall in the service of my Country, I shall have more triumph in my Death, than you in all your Laurels." The almanac presented readers aspiring to or attempting to maintain gentility with a model for patriotism. The patriotic senator serves in the legislature rather than the potentially tyrannical position of emperor. His virtue compels him to act in the best interests of the people, but he makes decisions independently. Finally, he shows a keen but sedate disposition to die for the good—meaning the liberty—of his country. The fact that the anecdote ends with the senator

[28] John Randolph, *Considerations on the present state of Virginia* (Williamsburg: 1774), 4-5.

proclaiming his willingness to die, not passively but "in the service of my Country," points to the inseparability of patriotism from martial sacrifice.[29]

Elite conceptions of patriotism drew upon republican notions of masculine virtue modeled for Great Britain by the Roman Republic. Authors sometimes drew distinctions in the way they conceived of patriotism, distinguishing between a patriot as one who supported his country and the liberties of its people, and a patriot as one who bore anti-British enmity in the context of the American Revolution, but these distinctions were not consistent.[30] Authors also frequently conflated the two, treating American patriotism of the 1770s as synonymous with the concept of a patriot as it dated back to Rome: a man who was self-sacrificing, virtuous, and willing to take up military arms. Virtue, the essential trait of a republican populace, was not at odds with violence. In fact, aspiring to patriotic violence indicated a virtuous population. Virginians recalled that for the ancient Romans, "Patriotism and Death were ever Hand in Hand," an axiom that verged on a code of conduct for white colonists who imagined themselves as descendants of the Roman political and cultural genealogy.[31] In 1772, the *Virginia Gazette* published a poem that read in part

> Here tears shall flow from a most gen'rous cause,
> Such tears as patriots shed for dying laws.
> He bids your breast with antient [*sic*] ardour rise,
> And calls froth Roman drops from British eyes.

The poem concluded by imagining the battle cries of Roman-British patriots: "Who hears them groan, and does not wish to bleed?" suggesting a popular and transhistorical consciousness that directed "anient ardour" toward self-sacrificing ends.[32]

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[29] "An Influence of true Magnanimity," In *The Virginia Almanack for the Year of Our Lord, 1771*, Almanac, (Williamsburg: William Rind, 1770).
[30] "Country" in the eighteenth-century context typically referred to someone's place of birth.
[31] "On Patriotism," *The Virginia Gazette*, June 18, 1772.
[32] Pope [pseud], "The Remembrancer No. V., *The Virginia Gazette*, March 8, 1770.

The fundamental entanglement of patriotism with violence was not restricted to discussions of martial sacrifice, however. Patriotism was also a constitutive logic of enslavement. A man unwilling to take up arms in defense of liberty risked being compared to a slave. One Virginian commenting on the imperial crisis half-jokingly encouraged patriots and Tories to "rise in the Devil's name, and murder one another; it will be nobler, and more Roman like, than to wait to be slaughtered, like so many sheep, by ministerial butchers."[33] The implication was that proper Romans were proactive in securing their liberty—embodying the butchers, not the sheep. Classical conceptions of patriotism insinuated that liberty was a zero-sum game. This maxim applied equally to enslavement as it did to the imperial crisis. Men unwilling to fight for their liberty, including the liberty to enslave others, left themselves supine in the face of true patriots. Patriotic violence preserved one man's authority over another, secured the dominion of one people over another. Virginia's "milky way" of patriots asked themselves, "To be or not to be—SLAVES OR FREEMEN?" and understood, free of contradiction, that being the latter required the existence of the former.[34]

The same class who subjected Black people to violent bondage scorned the enslaved as docilely reconciled to their enslavement. White enslavers accepted the popular, convenient, and false belief that enslaved people rarely resisted enslavement. This belief not only helped white enslavers justify their slave society, but it also formed a self-reinforcing myth that confirmed the obviousness of their condition to white enslavers. A *true* patriot would never accept such circumstances. For an "American" lover of liberty, wrote one Virginian in 1774, "To drag the base, inglorious, galling chain; With passive neck, slave like, to stoop, untaught, It grates our

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[33] Hildibrand Hothead [pseud], "To the impudent SCRIBBLER who signs himself JUNIUS neither the FIRST nor SECOND," *The Virginia Gazette*, November 2, 1775.
[34] Philo Hominus [pseud], "THE REMEMBRANCER, No. 1," *The Virginia Gazette*, February 8, 1770.

vitals to indulge such thought." Concluding that "The sons of freedom scorn the servile yoke," the author reminded readers that those unwilling to defend their liberty invited its denial.[35]

Authors sketching the relationship between passivity, slavery, resistance, and freedom not only associated nonviolence with the *condition* of slavery, but they also suggested a link between patriotic and innate racial character. "The false patriot is an enemy of the blackest complexion," remarked the *Gazette* in March of 1775.[36] The self-identified new Romans turned to classical theory to inform their denial that Black people possessed either a love of freedom or even the capacity to be free—two essential characteristics of true patriots. Colonial American slaveowners claimed, as Aristotle did, that slave status was a "state of being" induced by endogenous African emotional scarcity. Africans "lacked *thumos*, the emotional capacity to love freedom" and therefore made natural slaves.[37] Virginians who did not display adequate patriotic fervor therefore put their whiteness in question. One author wrote in July 1775 that he did not bother recruiting to the cause those unwilling to raise military arms in the colony, for "I cannot wash the Ethiop white. His breast, not animated with one spark of sterling patriotic fire" was "but an humble slave to prndence [*sic*]."[38] The scornful reference to prudence calls back to classical notions of proactive Romans. Virginians' belief that a pale complexion denoted a willingness to fight and die for one's liberty indicates a conceptual link between the capacity for patriotism and eighteenth-century notions of race and somatic origins of character.[39] Only men "possessed of the proper spirit, the ability to love their fellows and value their liberty deserved the reward of

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[35] A Virginian, "To the Honest Inhabitants of America, and true lovers of Liberty," *The Virginia Gazette*, September 1, 1774.
[36] "A Small Essay on Hypocrisy," *The Virginia Gazette*, March 9, 1775.
[37] Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution*, 83.
[38] A Ranger [pseud], "To the True Patriot," *The Virginia Gazette*, June 1, 1775.
[39] For more on this subject, see Greta LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

self-command."[40] This belief proliferated in Virginia despite whites' acute awareness of slave revolts domestically and overseas.

Merchants and planters maintained a broad Atlantic consciousness, necessitated by overseas financial connections, that made slave uprisings as far away as Jamaica relevant to Virginia. The colony had imposed restrictions on importing "seasoned" slaves from the Caribbean since Tacky's Revolt in 1760; merchant traders were privy to "firsthand accounts of the rebellion and bloody reprisals" and helped sow a fear of rebellious "contagion" from the Caribbean.[41] Even as they took precautions against enslaved resistance, Virginians insisted that only whites had the emotional capacity to desire and fight for liberty—in other words, to be patriotic. For whites constantly concerned about enslaved people's attempts to reclaim their freedom, rejecting the possibility that enslaved Black people had the character necessary for patriotism was a constitutive necessity of the ideology that legitimized slavery.

It was therefore natural for patriots to position Black enslaved people as the antithesis of patriotism and anti-British resistance because such an assumption was already part of the requisite psychology of a slave society. The claim that the character of the enslaved precluded a revolt was of course false, and white Virginians knew it. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's theory of the "unthinkable" helps elucidate why white Virginians refused to see the revolutionary power of enslaved people. Trouillot explains that the claim made by whites administering slave societies and future historians alike that enslaved Black people did not aspire to freedom "was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its

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[40] Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 70.
[41] Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 210. See also Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2018).

inhabitants."[42] Whites imagined a reality in which the motives behind enslaved resistance must have always been insolence or immoderate savage impulses rather than a rational desire for freedom.

Trouillot was writing about the Haitian Revolution, but his theory also describes the ontology of patriotism in Virginia's slave society.[43] Neither Saint-Domingue nor Virginia could exist without the equivocal (but no less legible for that) ontology that classified the enslaved as simultaneously bestial and docile. Enslaved people's real actions did not inform the ontology of slave societies. Whites facing the threat of slave rebellions paradoxically insisted that enslaved Black people were both naturally violent and disinclined to fight for their freedom. Discourses about acceptable patriotic violence began with the postulate that the label of "patriot" could only ever apply to whites. Virginian patriots used their imaginations to make unthinkable the idea that enslaved people might make the same connection between violence and liberty that informed revolutionary era resistance.

And yet, violence by whites to quell or punish enslaved people's escapes, refusals, and uprisings was an essential fixture of Virginia's slave society, one that predated the patriot movement by more than a century and a half. Virginians knew all too well that enslaved people resisted slavery in ways both dramatic and quotidian. We should generally avoid prioritizing violence as the preeminent form of enslaved resistance, but for this project, armed or otherwise violent instances best inform the context of patriotic discourse.[44] For example, white Virginians claiming that Black people possessed no affinity for liberty would have remembered the 1770 "riot" on a Hanover plantation, which began when a young enslaved man made no haste to obey

[42] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 73.
[43] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 73.
[44] For more, see Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

the deputy's order to start a fire and responded to his chastizement by producing an ax and beating the deputy "severely."[45] The deputy managed to escape and fled to recruit help. In the meantime, a group of enslaved people subdued and whipped the plantation's steward and another man, a calculated role reversal of plantation life. "Some say forty, some say fifty" enslaved people with clubs and staves met the twelve armed whites that returned with the deputy, who also brought with them "two little boys each carrying a gun." The response is better characterized as mobbish than martial. The enslaved rebels eventually fled before guns and swords; the white mob murdered at least three, including the "ringleader."[46]

Readers of the *Gazette* would have received the story, though related as a white victory, with anxiety. Violent resistance by the enslaved threatened both the material and intellectual security of the colony. It is therefore little wonder that Virginian essays remarking on patriotism and liberty in the 1770s conjured images of blood, martyrs, and armed confrontation, ensuring that no white man could imagine himself a patriot without understanding the violent implications. A week after his first "Remembrancer" essay, Philo Hominus praised northern merchants for refusing to vend with recalcitrant traders in Rhode Island who, in their continued business with the British Empire, were armed "with *knises* [*sic*] to cut their *country's throat*." The line drawn by northern merchants "attests their spirited zeal to the common cause, in which they will succeed, or die like boble [*sic*] martyrs in the attempt." The author invoked the same self-sacrificing Roman tradition prevalent in other *Gazette* publications, notably, in this case, in reference to commerce. The Roman republicans had wielded spears and swords, but business and trade were the bloodied weapons of the colonial elite. The essay has an element of fantasy: while

[45] "ENSLAVED AFRICANS RIOT ON PLANTATION OF VIRGINIA 1770," *The Virginia Gazette*, January 25, 1770.
[46] "ENSLAVED AFRICANS RIOT ON PLANTATION OF VIRGINIA 1770."

the author envisaged patriots as willing and oppressed martyrs, he also invented the violent actions to which they responded.[47]

Patriotism, both in the political and conceptual sense, required imagination. The Boston Massacre, which incited sympathetic fervor among colonists as far away as Virginia, was still a month away.[48] Prior to that incident, no organized British force had drawn white American blood in the colonies. Even so, the Virginia sources likened the colonies' situation to oppression and enslavement. Patriots needed first, an empathic imagination that made the actions of northern merchants relevant to Virginia readers, and second, the tendency to imagine circumstances in which one might make sacrifices for his liberty.[49]

The patriotic imagination extended to telling half-truths and outright lies about the American patriotic cause in order to downplay the reality of violent resistance. Virginian descriptions of anti-British sentiments in the New England colonies retold the story of mob resistance to feature characters who displayed attributes—reason, detachment, decorum—of great value to Virginians cultivating gentility. While elite Virginians fantasized in print about individuals dying nobly for their country, they also constructed a narrative of resistance that downplayed or outright elided the contributions of ordinary patriots who retaliated in the form of threatening and destructive mobs. The model patriot was a property-owning individual, not a faceless crowd. Philo Hominus boasted of the "strict wholsome [*sic*] discipline" administered to northern Tory merchants. To hear the *Gazette* tell it, the extent of northern resistance was print warfare and social shunning of Tories. If a crowd happened to assemble, Tories found themselves surrounded "not of a lawless *mob* —but of dispassionate, reputable characters [...] who have so

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[47] Note that enslaved Blacks also drew explicit connections between liberty and death. See Douglas Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[48] T.H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 3, 101-110.
[49] Philo Hominus [pseud], "The Remembrancer II," *The Virginia Gazette*, February 15, 1770.

reined their zeal with the bridle of reason, that the political execution of these *criminals* hath generally been conducted with great decorum."

Philo Hominus's instructions would not have seemed out of place as a parable in an almanac. And like most such parables, the story was not true. In reality, northern mobs burned imperial officials in effigy, destroyed property, and paraded tarred-and-feathered victims down the street. Even in this half-true tale, however, Philo Homnius could not disengage the vocabulary of violence. He concluded that some reformed Tories "have been *hatched* anew into the community, and from grovelling worms were transformed into useful bees," conjuring an image of a patriotic multitude that would, if provoked, respond with violence.[50]

Associations with Roman patriotism took on a grimmer connotation as Virginians began connecting the class dynamics of one faltering empire with another. Tories saw an opportunity to bring to bear class-distinct perceptions of popular violence. Elites inclined to trust the patriotism of the lower classes should remember, one "British American" Tory pointed out, that the Roman "populace" had supported the attempts of Caesar to overturn the constitution. Though it reads as paradoxical, the writer's linking of the people's majority with Caesar's despotism played on elite fears of mob tyranny. Meanwhile, "the wealthy, who if they had thrown their weight into the scale, might have restrained the errors of the populace," lost control of the Republic. The mistake of the wealthy classes of Rome had been their willingness to remain neutral and allow the populace free reign to assert its vision of Rome. Disaster befell the wealthy, as "those safest fences of every man's property were no sooner broke down, by overturning the constitution, than in the second triumvirate of Augustus, Anthony, and Lepidus, they found themselves foremost in the list of proscriptions, and a confiscation of that wealth."[51] Tories, themselves neither

[50] Philo Hominus [pseud], "The Remembrancer II," *The Virginia Gazette*, February 15, 1770.
[51] "The British American," *The Virginia Gazette*, July 14, 1774.

necessarily elite nor anti-democratic, indicated that a similar slippery slope awaited those propertied men who aligned themselves with the ordinary classes.

The reminder of what happened to the Roman elite would have unsettled elite patriots who imagined themselves as successors to the Romans before them. No consequence could be worse than losing property, material or human. Lest Virginia's wealthy readers overlook his point, the Tory author put it explicitly: even an unfavorable government would protect property, while "even a slight commotion may expose part of your *wealth* to the ravages of the populace, or the plunder of a licentious army."[52] The author argued that the patriotic urge to forge an ideal government should subordinate to ensuring the security of property and thus the stability of the class system. This warning cannot be read separately from the context of its publication in the largest slave society in the North American colonies—"wealth" meant human property. The British American's warning therefore also implies that empowered mobs of ordinary patriots—the "populace"—could pose a threat to the racial order. In Virginia, where forty percent of the population were enslaved Black people refigured as capital, the Tory suggestion that unchecked ordinary whites might emancipate, arm, or steal enslaved people from the elite classes would have startled elite patriots. In actuality, Virginia's popular patriot movement never courted either the alliances or emancipation of enslaved people. However, the popular patriots did construct an alternative movement that challenged aspects of the elite interpretation of what it meant to be a true patriot in other ways.

[52] "The British American," *The Virginia Gazette*, July 14, 1774.

THE "PULSE OF THE COMMON PEOPLE"

Elites projected leadership over the patriot movement by ruminating in print about appropriate patriotic conduct.[53] Rebuttals from the lower classes came in the form of threats, kidnappings, and physical violence justified as patriotic actions. Observers' reflections on popular actions provide details on the mechanics and perception of the popular patriot movement. As the stakes of the imperial crisis heightened into the mid-1770s, Virginian discourse on violence moved beyond the theoretical. As attempts to organize a military defense of the colony grew serious, so did public demonstrations against imperial policy, officials, and sympathizers. Arriving in Virginia from Great Britain in 1774, Nicholas Cresswell wrote in his journal that, "Everything here is in the utmost confusion." The colonists mobilized against noncompliant "tradesman," some of whom "have been tarred and feathered, others had their property burnt and destroyed by the populace."[54] The "populace" had not the time or access to define patriotism in print publication as the wealthier classes did. Their contributions to the debate came in the form of direct action. By enacting violence in the name of patriotism and the patriot movement, ordinary Virginians offered their interpretation of liberty in practice—an interpretation that unsettled elites.

Tories framed all patriots as an armed and threatening multitude who permitted no deviation from popular consensus. Sources from the elite Tory perspective provide valuable insight into the stakes of patriotic discourse to property owners. The strategy partly reflected

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[53] Recent scholarship suggests that the frequency with which elite patriot leaders published on the glory and popularity of their cause indicates that the opposite may have been true. Taking patriot printers at their word obscures possible dissent in the purported consensus, dissent exacerbated by incidents such as those discussed in this section. For more, see James R. Richter, *Tea: Consumption, Politics, and Revolution, 1773–1776* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

[54] Nicholas Cresswell, 24 October, 1774," in *The journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1777* (New York, L. MacVeagh, The Dial Press, 1924).

genuine belief, but also served as a way for Tories to undermine the patriot cause in order to advocate for other aims, such as anti-expansionism and neutral relations with Indigenous groups.[55] It is unlikely that most Tories truly believed that American patriots were uniformly lower-class. In fact, many Virginia Tories themselves lived in the backcountry and did not belong to the propaganda-producing elite classes.

Tory depictions aimed to condemn the patriot cause as universally lower-class, democratic, and posing a threat to elite liberty even as Virginia gentlemen and merchants endorsed anti-imperial policy and sometimes participated in various acts of resistance. In 1775, a Tory Londoner visiting Norfolk, Virginia, reported receiving letters "alledging [*sic*] that the committees seize the property of the merchants, dispose of them at pleasure, and send the proceeds to the REBELS at Boston." He complained of a stigma against the political contrarianism, accusing Virginia patriots of "inviting the vengeance of an outrageous and lawless mob, to be exercised on the unhappy [Tory] 'victims.'"[56] The Londoner's use of "Lawless" refers not to the assembly of mobs—established extralegal institutions in the colonies as well as Britain—but to the actions of those mobs, which he worried might direct popular animosity at non-compliant merchants.

Threats to property ownership, the foundation of status in colonial Virginia, would have startled elites regardless of their political alignments. The Tory exploitation of upper-class consciousness becomes clear in this source. Despite the general alliance of the Anglo merchant class with the patriot cause, the visitor tapped into class enmities by reminding the propertied

[55] The Virginia gentry honed in on the land west of the Appalachian Mountains as an opportunity to expand and diversify the colony's soil-exhausting plantation economy. British policy following the French and Indian War walled off these lands to settlers, driving the speculation-obsessed gentry to support the patriot cause while winning the support of backcountry farmers who feared that expansion meant conflict with Indigenous people. For more, see Colin G. Calloway, *The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[56] "Norfolk, May 11, 1775," *The Virginia Gazette, or the Norfolk Enquirer*, May 11, 1775. Internal quotations added by the original author, who protested the Londoner's accusations.

classes what they had at stake. Mutinous merchants risked the destruction or loss of their property and misappropriated proceeds redistributed to the Boston rebels. Even late in the Revolutionary period, Tories feared popular violence and an upset of the class hierarchy, not an organized military response, a fear they attempted to instill in patriot leaders. And while elite Virginia patriots recognized that patriotism and violence were inseparable, they also knew that the wrong kind of violence—theft, assault, destruction—made a gentleman appear base and undisciplined. Both sides worried that the patriot cause might be synonymous with violent, public consequences for dissenters.[57]

One Tory visualization of patriotism in Virginia made an incisive argument about the stakes of mob-led patriotism for propertied men across political affiliations. By November of 1774, compliance with the Continental Association's nonimportation agreement was law, but Virginia patriots exerted immense pressure on those merchants who hesitated to support the boycotts publicly.[58] The prospect of criminality would not have been terribly threatening for the merchant class, accustomed to smuggling goods past imperial officials. Still, on the ninth of the month, hundreds of merchants arrived in the capital city of Williamsburg to sign a resolution proclaiming Virginian support for intercolonial nonimportation agreements.

Three months later, the British cartoonist Philip Dawe published a dramatic depiction of the signing entitled "The Alternative of Williamsburg" [Figure 1.0]. Dawe published the image in London, but the image circulated in Virginia soon after. The engraving shows merchants hunched over the resolution, surrounded by a crowd of brawling patriots, one waving a flag reading "Liberty." On one side stands a statue of the former royal governor Lord Botetourt; on

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[57] Robert Sayer and John Bennett, Publisher, and Philip Dawe, "The Alternative of Williams-burg," United States, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1775 (London: Printed for R. Sayer and J. Bennett), Photograph.

[58] Virginia's nonimportation agreement pledged that the colony would not import goods, manufactures, enslaved Africans, from Great Britain or its Caribbean colonies. Virginians also promised to reject imports of tea from any locality.

the other, a gallows advertising a "cure for the refractory": a bag of feathers and a bucket of tar. The homely rioters do not carry the rifles of a colonial militia, nor do they wear gentlemen's wigs or uniforms indicating an association with an official military body. Rather, they wield clubs, shears, and swords. A white woman with children, a Black man, and a man wearing a turban stand among them. The children, who according to popular Enlightenment thought lacked the ability to reason, connote disorder and irrationality. Dawe's inclusion of the man in a turban indicates that he heard rumors of racialized gender and sexual deviance among common patriots; colonists and Britons alike associated "Turks" with sodomy and the subjugation of white Christians.[59] The depiction of a Black man alongside a white woman outside the home similarly alludes to anxiety about base sexuality and possible racial mixing. In urban Williamsburg, where a disproportionate majority of enslaved people were women or young boys forced to labor in domestic housekeeping, the inclusion of an adult Black man speaks to fears about a potential slave uprising presumably led by enslaved men.[60] Brought together, these unflattering images depict a popular patriot cause that embodied what elites saw as some of the greatest threats to the colony.

[59] Greta LaFleur writes, "If the figure of sodomy was understood in the late seventeenth century to index crises in spiritual and political order, its association with Islam was not only the result of centuries of disparaging proto-orientalist rhetoric. It also pointed to a terrifyingly possible reorganization of world order, in which both Christians and Christianity would be preposterously subjugated to Muslim control." Greta LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 100.
[60] Thad Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1965). 43.

Figure 1.0

The elite worried that popular patriots might court an alliance between the oppressed peoples of the colony—something that ordinary white Virginians never actually pursued. Tories warned that it was not possible to both "embark on a war against tyranny" and "prevent their slaves from imbibing the heady notions of liberty and equality."[61] Dawe's engraving suggests

[61] Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 54.

that the merchants had no choice but to sign the resolutions or face a mob peopled by Virgnia's discontented masses including racial minorities. Tories and elite patriots alike feared the commitment of ordinary patriots to creating a consensus of disenfranchised people. The latent power of enslaved people was at the center of these concerns.

While sensational, Dawe's drawing did not wholly fabricate the events in Williamsburg in 1774. It would be unfounded to accuse Tories of inventing the prevalence of patriot violence among the ordinary classes. It is true that some signers of the resolutions indeed feared violent retaliation if they did not comply. The Scottish merchant James Parker learned from a firsthand observer that "a pole erected by order of Colo Archd Cary, a strong patriot, opposite Raleigh Tavern upon which was hung a large mop & a bag of feathers, under a bbl [barrel] of tar" awaited the signers in Williamsburg.[62] Ironically, Archibald Cary was a planter and one of the wealthiest men in Virginia. The leader of the mob that assembled was one of the gentlemen Dawe suggested had the most to fear from mob politics. However, if we assume a grain of truth in Dawe's engraving, it seems likely that the Williamsburg mob both comprised ordinary people and at some point exceeded Cary's authority. In this nuanced situation, ordinary patriots reinforced elites' fears while also carrying out the objectives of the colony's most elite body.[63] Common people enforced the aims of the Virginia Congress and the planter Cary by making no secret of what fate awaited the non-compliant.

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[62] William Aitchison to James Parker, November 14, 1774 (Liverpool: Liverpool Public Library, Parker Family Papers).

[63] The participation of gentlemen in colonial mass actions is well-documented. I do not intend to suggest that all crowd actions only involved people of lower-class backgrounds, nor that the colonial elite never condescended to participating in these actions. The planter Patrick Henry is a well-known case. I do, however, argue that elite participation in Virginia mobs was exceptional between 1770 and 1776, and typically merited a note identifying the gentleman in the press. Unnamed persons are almost never "notable" members of the community. For more on elite participation in mass actions see Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the development of American opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972). For postwar disavowals of mob actions by elites, see Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

Likely anticipating the difficulty of assembling a mob large enough to intimidate the hundreds of merchants gathered in Williamsburg, Archibald Cary honed in on two offending merchants in particular: Michael Wallace and Anthony Warwick, known violators of the tea boycott. Prior to the Williamsburg gathering, Cary chaired an informal committee meeting concerning the two merchants, during which members "spoke very violently against them" and questioned how they could "insult the majority of the people." Dawe and the merchants alike correctly feared retaliation from ordinary people who viewed themselves as enforcers of the patriot consensus. More than simply supporting anti-imperial actions, Cary's supporters inveighed against merchants resisting the "majority," indicating a democratic interpretation of patriotism that unnerved elite observers. Parker, who was not himself in Williamsburg, made no mention of a mob, but the threat looming outside the boisterous patriot haven of Raleigh Tavern was clear. Recalling the events, Parker commented, "I would willingly hope the patriotic fervor here is at its hight [*sic*].[64]

Despite the apparent effectiveness of physical threats, the Virginia upper class downplayed rumors of mobs and violent retaliation, balancing concerns for their own security with rebuttals to certain Tory characterizations of the patriot movement as base and chaotic. While Tory imaginations tended to run wild, elite patriots had an equally liberal relationship with the truth. Patriot presses were notorious for being run by propagandists who shamelessly promoted their political agendas. The *Virginia Gazettes*, published in Williamsburg, are especially dubious in this case. An address delivered to the paper the day after the signings read that the merchants "voluntarily and generally signed" the resolution and "have generously concurred with them in the uggle [*sic*] for Liberty." Even without Dawe and Parker's contrasting version of events, there is little doubt that the author overstated the strength of the consensus for

[64] James Parker to Charles Stuart, November 27, 1774 (Liverpool: Liverpool Public Library, Parker Family Papers).

the sake of narrative—did "4-500" merchants ever achieve "universal Satisfaction" on any issue?[65] The address makes no mention of the tar and feathers, nor the invectives made by Cary's committee. It remains unclear who wrote the address, but given that two iterations of the *Gazette* published identical versions, it was presumably an announcement made by involved patriots, likely elites in attendance at the Capitol building. Aside from the strategic prudence of exaggerating the merchant consensus, elite patriots also distanced themselves from depictions like the one created by Dawe, which denounced Virginia patriots as a race and gender-diverse mob, to maintain a pretense of gentility.

As evidenced by their discourse in print, elites did not oppose violence on principle so much as they despised the idea of a disorderly mob leading anti-imperial resistance. Privately voicing a sentiment that he never made public, James Madison wrote a friend in 1775 that "I wish most heartily we had Rivington [a prominent New York Loyalist] & his ministerial Gazetteers for 24. hours in this place. Execrable as their designs are, they would meet with adequate punishment."[66] Gentlemen like Madison understood the efficacy of crowd violence but dared not validate it. Madison had too much property at stake to be anything but delicate in his interpretation of the Revolutionary mob.

Other mobs convened in support of rebellious trade legislation enacted by elite patriots. These mobs of ordinary patriots sought to intimidate offending British officials, but their apparent enthusiasm for violent theater also proved unsettling to politically sympathetic Virginia elites. In January of 1775, a "vast concourse of people" assembled in Richmond to hang and burn the effigy of British Prime Minister Lord Frederick North. James Davenport, the clerk at a subsequent courthouse meeting of local landowners, noted with alarm that some of the spectators

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[65] "Williamsburg, November 10," *The Virginia Gazette*, November 10, 1774.
[66] James Madison to William Bradford," Virginia, [early March] 1775.

"seemed to enjoy an ill-natured satisfaction as it, which they expressed by loud huzza, and plenty of d—s [damns]." Notably, Davenport's concern had less to do with the violent theater performed by the crowd than it did with the uncouth enjoyment that seemed to come from it. A local attorney found an elevated spot and tried to settle the crowd by reminding them that Virginia's plan amid the imperial crisis was to sever commercial relations with Great Britain until Parliament abrogated its current taxation policy. Left unspoken, or at least unrecorded by Davenport, was the implication that threatening the life of the Prime Minister did not conform with the political strategy established by patriot leaders. Even in early 1775, colonial reconciliation with Great Britain was still the goal. Discussing the "pulse of the common people" at the Richmond courthouse, the landowners, including "some of the greatest men in the colony," agreed to encourage commoners to redirect their efforts to the established plan of nonimportation and nonexportation.[67]

Privately, elites worried that their patriot associations might blur the line of civility that separated them from the mobs agitating for the same cause. Robert Munford, living and writing in Virginia during the onset of the Revolution, satirized the fractious politics of the colony at the very beginning of the war for independence. His play *The Patriots: A Comedy in Five Acts* captures the elite perspective on patriotic violence. Meanwell and Trueman, "Two gentlemen of fortune accused of toryism," decry Trueman's "violent patriot" and "dice-box"-loving soon-to-be father-in-law. Meanwell declares that "real patriots are mild, and secretly anxious for their country, but modest in expressions of zeal." Trueman, agreeing, expresses his hope that "the armies of America be always led by such as these!"[68] Meanwell and Trueman (whose

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[67] James Davenport, "Mr. PINKNEY BE pleased to publish the following letter, together…" *The Virginia Gazette*, February 9, 1775.

[68] Robert Munford, *The Patriots: A Comedy in Five Acts. (Virginia, ca. 1777), 56-57.* Almost none of Munford's literary works can be precisely dated; the consensus among historians is that *The Patriots* was written sometime in the 1770s and published in 1777.

heavy-handed names indicate the virtue of the upper-class patriot) do not shy away from the prospect of violence, but key to their imagination of the American war is its waging by "mild," restrained patriots, whose passions moderate as they funnel through the ordering force of an organized army.

Despite the propensity with which they threatened and enacted violence, ordinary patriots balked at military service, indicating divergent understandings of how patriotic violence should look. The mobilization of military forces in Virginia provides insight into the discord within the patriot movement. Michael McDonnell's research on Virginia volunteer companies and minutemen informs the following section. McDonnell examines the common people's "Revolution from Below" in Virginia, which I argue emerged partly due to disagreements about what types of violence could be patriotic. As McDonnell puts it, "Resistance to the minute service among the middling sort in Virginia […] was not over whether or not to fight the British, but over how and on whose "terms" to do so."[69] Whether violence could be patriotic was not up for debate; indeed, violence was inextricably linked to patriotic behavior. What was in question was what type of violence was legitimate under the banner of liberty.

Colonists tended to greet military service with a skepticism rooted in republican understandings of power and individual liberty, but by 1774 it was becoming clear that Virginia needed an organized armed defense against a potential occupation by regular British forces. The concern among elites was that violence be enacted by "Men in whose Hands the Sword may safely be trusted," as George Mason put it in a letter to George Washington in 1775.[70] The gentleman class initially created volunteer companies under the assumption that fellow

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[69] Michael McDonnell, "Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below," in *Past Forward: Articles from the Journal of American History, Volume 1: From Colonial Foundations to the Civil War*, ed. James Sabathne and Jason Stacy (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2016), 114.
[70] George Mason to George Washington, 14 October 1775, *Founders Online,* National Archives.

gentlemen would fill out the ranks and set a patriotic example for the ordinary classes. Few planned to join the fighting themselves. Intended to be an organization of elites, volunteer companies lacked a clear hierarchy of command; enlisted men could elect officers and replace them with a popular vote. Volunteer companies served as a kind of laboratory for the egalitarian republic that elites believed could not feasibly include the lower classes, even if its implementation would require popular support. The loose organization of the companies suggests that Virginia's early volunteer companies were for show and experimentation rather than utility. This model nevertheless suggested the necessity of violence. Nicholas Cresswall worried in 1774 that "Independent Companies are raising in every County on the Continent…and train their Men as if they were on the Eve of War…"[71] To observers, the threat and centrality of violence was clear.

Cresswell's claim that "every County on the Continent" was raising volunteer companies was an exaggeration, however. Officers found recruitment challenging. Performing gentility required compartmentalizing ideas from action; the volunteer companies allowed gentlemen to contrive of a martial model necessary to achieve their imagined government while implicitly assuming that their bodies would not be the ones at risk if the imperial crisis came to an armed conflict. Further, due to various equipment and uniform requirements—volunteers had to provide these themselves and therefore essentially had to pay to enlist—companies were generally ill-attended, even by gentlemen. Less than 15 percent of eligible men in Fairfax County enlisted as volunteers.[72] Attempting to rally a sparse regiment, George Gilmer, doctor and confidant of Thomas Jefferson, encouraged the "Gentlemen Volunteers [...] Never to bury the Tomahawk until

[71] Nicholas Cresswell, "24 October, 1774," *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell*.
[72] McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, Class, and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia*, 46.

liberty shall be fixed on an immovable basis thro the whole continent."[73] The use of the tomahawk as an emblem of freedom, despite patriot Virginians' antagonism toward Indigenous peoples, suggests that violent symbology was part of a patriotic aesthetic performed by the wealthy classes. Further, the aesthetic dislocation of the tomahawk from an Indigenous context to a white colonial one alludes to the literal displacement of Native people from Virginia's frontier by land speculators at the helm of the elite patriot movement.[74] Gilmer and other gentlemen's support for the kind of "savage," independent violence associated with Indigenous people would prove only rhetorical.[75]

Ordinary patriots continued to assert influence over the revolution in Virginia, chipping away at the elite monopolization of revolutionary actions. Beyond their issues with recruitment, volunteer companies faced additional challenges from the popular patriot movement. In April of 1775, a day after the Battle of Lexington and Concord and amid swirling rumors of a slave rebellion in Virginia, Lord Dunmore seized the gunpowder from the armory in Williamsburg and infuriated white Virginians of all classes, who believed that in addition to obstructing patriot resistance, Dunmore intended to leave the colony defenseless against a slave revolt.[76] Gilmer's urge for gentlemen volunteers "Never to bury the Tomahawk" had come only days before Dunmore's raid; now, ordinary patriots flocked to volunteer service. Equipment requirements necessarily became suggestions. Elites watched helplessly as the democracy they intended for gentlemen fell to the lower classes, who ousted unpopular officers, gave their own orders, and

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[73] George Gilmer, *Address of George Gilmer to Albemarle County First Independent Company of Gentlemen Volunteers*, April 18, 1775, *Rev. Va.* III.
[74] See Colin Calloway, *The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[75] Though beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to emphasize that Virginians spent much of the revolutionary and Revolutionary War era waging a frontier war against Indigenous peoples in the colony's backcountry. In fact, Lord Dunmore was not present for the events in Williamsburg depicted by Dawe in 1774 because he was in the Ohio Country waging a campaign against the Shawnee. The campaign was popular among Virginia's elite patriots and served to briefly redeem Dunmore's faltering reputation.
[76] Virginians would not learn of the events at Lexington and Concord for another week.

even began marching toward Williamsburg to retaliate against Dunmore.[77] With no opposing army to fight, volunteers turned to policing colonial Virginia and those they deemed enemies of liberty.

In what would become an ironic trend in the waning months of his governorship, Dunmore's wariness of Virginia patriots only exacerbated the processes he had hoped to stop. Dunmore decided to seize the gunpowder in part because of the organization of gentlemen volunteers, not because of unruly mobs like the one visualized by Philip Dawe in the previous year. Dunmore assured angry Williamsburg residents that he removed the gunpowder from the magazine in order to prevent it from being hijacked by enslaved people agitating for freedom, reminding Virginians of the "apprehensions which seemed to prevail throughout this wholecountry, of an intended insurrection of the slaves," some of whom he had seen "about the magazine" at night.[78] However, Dunmore wrote privately to William Legge in May that the "dangerous measures" undertaken by Virginians, "particularly their having come to a resolution of raising a body of armed Men in all the counties, made me think it prudent to remove some Gunpowder which was in a Magazine in this place." Confiscating the gunpowder unintentionally ensured that the mingy military defense gathered strength.

As incensed ordinary Virginians filled out the once-sparse ranks of the volunteer companies, Dunmore wrote, "The independent company got under Arms. All the People were assembled, and during their consultation, continual threats were brought to my house." If he did not return the gunpowder, "it was their resolution to seize upon, or massacre me, and every person found giving me assistance."[79] The mob that gathered in Williamsburg to threaten

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[77] McDonnell, "Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below," 122-125.
[78] John Murray, "VIRGINIA, to wit," *The Virginia Gazette*, May 5, 1775.
[79] John Murray to William Legge, May 1, 1775, Colonial Williamsburg Digital Library.

Dunmore's life impelled Williamsburg's elite, planter John Randolph, mayor and printer John Dixon, and treasurer Robert Carter Nicholas, to take action to quiet the commotion. The three men confronted Dunmore face-to-face and politely asked that he return the gunpowder. Randolph, Dixon, and Nicholas's approach exemplified class-distinct approaches to resistance. All four men had an interest in deterring mass violence. Nevertheless, Dunmore refused the request, and the situation in Williamsburg only worsened.[80] The volunteers enjoyed being disarmed as much as gentlemen did, and they responded without the affected sobriety and lateral class respect that elites afforded to Dunmore.

Popular organizing against the gunpowder incident incited a heightening of the stakes for the colony. The threat of volunteer-led violence in Williamsburg galled Dunmore so greatly that it incepted his idea for an emancipation proclamation.[81] In June, Dunmore abandoned the pretense of protecting white Virginia from its enslaved population. The Virginia House of Burgesses reported that Dunmore promised, "if any injury or insult was offered to himself, or either of them [Dunmore and one of his captains], that he would decalre Freedom to the Slaves and reduce the city of Williamsburg to ashes."[82] For elites who had long worried about both the security of their property and the direction in which the popular patriot movement might take the colony, the fallout from the gunpowder incident must have only reaffirmed the belief that ordinary patriots posed a liability.

Elites would not so easily relinquish the leadership of the official patriot cause to unruly volunteer companies, but the colony needed a substantial defense force, and elite attempts to create one had thus far failed. Dunmore's botching of the situation in Williamsburg aroused an

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[80] John Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2007), 1.
[81] Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783*, 2-3.
[82] "Wednesday, the 14 of June," *Journal of the House of Burgesses in Virginia, 1773-1776*. 1775, 231.

enthusiasm for violent rebellion that the gentlemen volunteers never inspired. It was in this context that volunteers in Williamsburg kidnapped and threatened the skeptical Joshua Hardcastle. To recapture control of the movement, elites created the minuteman service in that same autumn of 1775. Elites envisioned the minutemen as a fighting force of eight thousand men to defend the colony. Service was not mandatory; Virginians of all classes tended to reject standing armies as tyrannical and recalled compulsory enlistments during the French and Indian War. Despite this criticism by the lower classes, the minutemen were less authoritarian than any standing army or militia under royal control. However, minuteman companies did depart significantly from the come-and-go nature of the volunteer companies. Enlisted men were required to serve for a determined period of time and answer to appointed officers—almost always members of the gentry class who would not otherwise participate in military service. Small farmers owning few or no slaves did not possess the luxury of elites to commit to the training that regular minute service required. The new military organization paid all enlisted men, elite or not, according to their rank; the previous volunteer companies had not paid at all.[83]

The zeal with which ordinary patriots had volunteered vanished when faced with the prospect of joining a more traditional military force requiring a sacrifice of time and money. In the fall of 1775, Gilmer lamented to the people of Albemarle County that "the Convention have altered the name Volunteers to that of Minute Men, and behold! what a wondrous effect it has had. Out of near three hundred Volunteers there are how many Minute Men? So few that I am afraid to name them." Gilmer endorsed violent resistance, though he took care to specify that the scriptures "forbid private revenge, but do not prohibit acts of public justice," implying that

[83] McDonnell, "Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below," 122-126; Michael McDonnell, "Plebeian Infamy: The Minutemen and Their World," in *The Politics of War: Race, Class, and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia*, 105–34 (University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

acceptable violence was a tool of social and political order. Albemarle County enlistments remained low. Gilmer's address likely lost some of its potency when he urged the crowd to "pray for Washingtons, Putnams, Schuylers, to spring up from the wilds of America, and may the torrent of their just rage be sufficient to beat down all tyrannical opposition."[84] Middling Virginians were not enthusiastic at the prospect of waging violence in the name of the colonies' elite families.

Volunteer companies remained well-attended by lower-class Virginians even after the creation of the minute service. Writing from Norfolk, Scotsman Robert Gray recorded the advancement of hundreds of "shirtmen" with the "intention of destroying the town" in December 1775. The recalcitrant Tory merchant Anthony Warwick confirmed that some 600 volunteers were on the march from Williamsburg to either Norfolk or his home of Nansemond County, he could not be sure. Having been tarred and feathered in August, Warwick had bitter experience with the popular patriots. Warwick expected the volunteers' numbers to swell to 1500 by the time they reached their destination. "It is generally believed they come with a professed intention of destroying both by fire," he wrote, "as they think them places of refuge for those that are inimical to what they call the liberties of America."[85]

Patriot elites already nervous about the rogue volunteers and suspicious of the racial character of mass violence likely also found cause for concern in the volunteers' style of dress. Warwick's description of the volunteers expresses the discomfort that Tories and perhaps patriot elites felt about the irregular defense of the "liberties of America." The derogatory "shirtman" moniker for the uniformless volunteers described their coarse, plain hunting shirts. Rhys Isaac

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[84] George Gilmer, *Address of George Gilmer to Inhabitants of Albemarle*, Fall, 1775.
[85] Anthony Warwick, "REMAINDER of the EXTRACTS of LETTERS begun in our last," *The Virginia Gazette*, December 29, 1775. The volunteers never attacked either Norfolk or Nansemond. Some evidence suggests they may have turned back and remained in Williamsburg.

quotes one Norfolk resident as "explaining that 'these Shirt men, or Virginia uniform, are dressed with an Oznab[urg] Shirt over their Cloaths, a belt round them with a Tommyhawk or Scalping knife.'"[86] The volunteer patriots wore osnaburg cloth most often used to clothe the enslaved, and armed themselves with weapons that evoked the Indigenous people "at our Backs, committing daily Massacres, a cruel, daring, and insidious enemy."[87] The racialized ensemble was intended to unnerve Tories, and probably did so, although it is ironic that volunteers leveraged racialized symbols at the same moment that the colony coalesced around fears of Black violence. Unlike the tomahawks and scalping knives, it is unlikely that volunteers deliberately chose osnaburg cloth to indicate an affiliation with the type of violence that enslaved people might commit. The use of the plain, durable fabric in this case only indicates that most volunteers subsisted via their own manual labor.

The departure of ordinary and lower-class resistance from the elite vision of virtuous, restrained Roman patriots signifies a Virginia patriot movement divided on the axis of allowable violence. The association between patriotism and violence in Virginia print culture makes clear that no self-identified patriot believed that resistance should be bloodless, but there was a fine line between violence that threatened British rule and violence that threatened elite control of Virginia society. Enemies of the patriot movement seized the opportunity to argue that ordinary patriotism threatened elite status more than British taxation and occupation ever could.

While they may not have often published in the *Gazette*, ordinary patriots were not an unthinking mass, blind to politics and conceptual discourses. By making it known that they waged popular violence in the name of patriotism, ordinary Virginians added to discourses about the appropriate defense of liberty. Elite denunciations of mobbish violence both before and after

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[86] Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," 381.
[87] "Considerations on the present state of Virginia and documents relating to the Congress," Pamphlet (The National Archives, December 1774).

the escalation of resistance in Virginia not only show a strategic effort to make the colony appear united, but they also indicate that elites harbored deep fears about the contributions of the ordinary classes to patriotic debates. The private acknowledgments of elite patriots reveal an understanding that seemingly disordered violence had its uses; the real problem was that ordinary people believed that patriotism licensed them to confront anyone who, as Joshua Hardcastle's kidnappers put it, might "sport with the great and glorious cause of America" as they understood it.[88] That prerogative could and sometimes did extend to the propertied elite, whose monied interests must have seemed a world away to ordinary Virginians.

THE UNIFICATION OF VIRGINIA

A reorientation of discourses about mass violence to center threats posed by enslaved Black people rather than ordinary white people formed the foundation of the consensus that ultimately unified Virginia's patriot movements. In November of 1775, Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation that imposed martial law upon Virginia and promised freedom to any enslaved people or indentured servants who fled patriot masters for the service of the British. Dunmore, who did not harbor antislavery convictions, intended that the proclamation frighten white patriots into rolling back increasingly popular demands for independence. It was a gamble that went disastrously awry. At least two-thousand Black women and men took Dunmore up on his offer, inciting panic in white Virginian observers. Elite preoccupations with disorderly mob violence and the popular patriot reluctance about joining a cause led by planters and merchants proved coterminous in the face of emancipation. Sectional conflict would continue throughout the war years, but white Virginians across class lines entered 1776 solidly in favor of not just resistance to Britain, but complete political independence.

[88] "Mess. Dixon & Hunter," *The Virginia Gazette*, September 9, 1775.

Threats to material property once imperiled a patriotic consensus in Virginia, but in the end it was still property—human property—that united white Virginians in favor of the broader patriot cause. Whites flocked in droves to the patriot cause in the wake of Dunmore's Proclamation, already seething at the governor's removal of the gunpowder from Williamsburg and horrified that the British might try to incite a slave revolt. In the weeks following the proclamation, merchant Anthony Warwick reported that between Williamsburg and Norfolk, "there are not 20 inhabitants now, in both towns, but what are avowed Tories, and have publickly declared themselves friends to government."[89] Dunmore's gamble had not only solidified Virginian support for the patriot cause, it also smothered disagreements between those who had always been patriots.

White racial solidarity united Virginia in favor of independence despite internal disagreements about what it meant to be a patriot. Robert Parkinson and others refer to the "backlash thesis" to explain the dissipation of Loyalism in Virginia following Dunmore's Proclamation, but Parkinson does not consider that the Proclamation also extinguished disputes within the patriot movements.[90] Virginians were willing to debate what constituted allowable violence for white patriots, but could not afford to entertain the prospect of violence waged by Black slaves. Parkinson's decision to "avoid using the word race [...] but employ words like 'prejudices,' stereotypes,' and 'attitudes'" to describe the backlash to Dunmore's Proclamation is intended to preclude anachronism in describing the inchoate formation of race in slave societies.[91] However, the 1775 unification of white patriots across class divisions indicates that white solidarity predated the ostensibly coherent racial constructions of the nineteenth century.

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[89] Anthony Warwick, "REMAINDER of the EXTRACTS of LETTERS begun in our last..." *The Virginia Gazette*, December 29, 1775.
[90] Robert Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Williamsburg: Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, 2016), 154.
[91] Robert Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* (Williamsburg: Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, 2021), 11.

Further, downplaying race as an essential feature of the backlash thesis obfuscates the centrality of patriotism to the violence of American slavery. Slave societies necessitated a white monopoly on violence. Ordinary white patriots destabilized elites' comfort on the basis of physical safety and material property, but Dunmore's usurping of the racial order structured by ownership of human beings was another matter. Even the lowest order of Virginia whites, indentured servants, did not join Dunmore's service in nearly the numbers that enslaved people did.[92] Ordinary whites, most of whom owned few or no slaves, understood that their whiteness placed them on a fundamentally different plane from the enslaved. Dunmore's offer to not only emancipate former slaves but to arm them against their enslavers threatened the racialized parameters of violence that had so recently emerged as a unifying force among white Virginians.

The response that met Dunmore in 1775 veered into the kind of gratuitous violence Virginia elites claimed to renounce as unpatriotic. Even a month before the November 7 proclamation, Virginians so despised the royal governor for his seizure of the gunpowder store that the *Virginia Gazette*, reporting an incident in which a hurricane on the Chesapeake Bay nearly drowned the governor, consoled disappointed observers that "according to the old saying, *those who are born to be n— D* [hanged] *will never be* DROWNED."[93] During the same storm, a ship belonging to Dunmore's trusted captain Matthew Squire washed ashore in Hampton, Virginia, where residents discovered that Squire was "harbouring gentlemen's negroes," including two runaways from a local planter, probably men who offered their expertise in navigation the Chesapeake Bay and Hampton River. The Hampton residents burned the ship to the ground and recaptured the enslaved people on board. Squire and his crew escaped intact and made it back to Dunmore's vessel. Squire's "pilot, a mulatto man" named Joseph Harris, an

[92] Michael McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, Class, and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia*, 144.
[93] "Otter sloop. To the GENTLEMEN of the WILLIAMSBURG COMMITTEE," *The Virginia Gazette*, *September* 10, 1775.

experienced waterman who had once been enslaved in Hampton, also escaped. “After skulking in the woods about 48 hours,” Harris “found means to paddle off in a canoe,” eluded the white mob and returned to Squire’s service.[94] The burning of Squire’s ship, one of the few instances of colonial arson in the early revolutionary period, is a testament to the ferocity with which whites, even ordinary Hampton residents, responded to the British alliance with enslaved people.[95] Hostility only increased when Squire, presumably with Dunmore’s backing, retaliated by seizing three slave ships—“*passage-boats*, with the negroes in them”—presumably for “the king’s service.”[96]

After the proclamation, the patriotic imagination that once conjured images of noble Roman republicans devolved into producing fantasies about what grisly fate might be in store for Dunmore and his allies. On November 30, two weeks after Dunmore offered freedom and arms to the enslaved, the *Gazette* printed an anecdote describing how a “Mr. Thomas Archer, junior, of York, being in company with some gentlemen” discovered a duck in the York River and, boasting about his shooting prowess, produced a rifle and “fired, and favoured [severed] the head of the duck from its body." The story made no mention of Dunmore or the confiscating of slave ships, but the *Gazette* added a coda: “If beheading would not be doing too much honour,” wrote the author, “we could heartily with that pirate Dunmore had shared a like fate, instead of the inoffensive [f]owl.” Dunmore here became a pirate, a thief of human property. Not content with the fantasy of decapitation, the author echoed the sentiment of the earlier report that longed for Dunmore’s disgraceful death by hanging, adding a racial epithet: “But alas! such a Negro, such a *daging* deserves no other *end* than the most ignominious of culprits, the [*sic*] and the gibbet.”

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[94] “WILLIAMSBURG, September 8. EVERY day last week it rained more…” *The Virginia Gazette*, September 8, 1775; Woody Holton, “‘Rebel against Rebel’: Enslaved Virginians and the Coming of the American Revolution,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 105, no. 2 (1997): 157–158.

[95] There are other well-known instances of rebellious arson in Rhode Island and New York during the 1770s, but the burning of Squire’s ship was apparently the only case in Virginia.

[96] “WILLIAMSBURG, September 15,” *The Virginia Gazette*, September 17, 1775.

Dunmore's actions exposed white Virginians to the violence from formerly enslaved people; white Virginians responded accordingly by labeling Dunmore eligible for the kind of violent retaliation reserved for the most disdained and reviled members of society.[97]

Race and property ownership mutually ordered Virginia society. The assumption that individual property ownership made for a stable society was not merely metaphorical; enslaved people seizing their freedom posed a direct threat to both white security and white property. The British alliance with enslaved people thus stoked the fears of whites across class lines. Virginians associated life and property in the same breath. Dunmore "hath offered freedom to the servants and *slaves* of those he is pleased to term *rebels*," wrote statesman and planter Edmund Pendleton in December 1775, "arming them against their masters, and faithful subjects, whose property is rendered insecure, and whose lives are exposed to the dangers of a general insurrection."[98] Property ownership and mortality went hand in hand.

CONCLUSION

Despite white Virginians' self-victimizing vituperation against Dunmore, the primary victims of backlash to the 1775 emancipation proclamation were enslaved people apprehended in pursuit of their freedom, as well as those who remained trapped in bondage. In November of that year, a group of seven enslaved men and two enslaved women steered a canoe down the James River toward Dunmore's base at Point Comfort. They had probably been enslaved in the marshy area of Warwick County, Virginia, known as Mulberry Island. The river would have been familiar to enslaved men accustomed to working the water traffic in the Chesapeake region.

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[97] *"A copy of the* OATH *extorted from the people of* Norfolk *and* Princess Anne, *by lord* Dunmore," *The Virginia Gazette*, November 30, 1775. The meaning of the clearly derogatory term "daging" is unclear. It may refer to a dag: a feces-caked bit of wool around a sheep's hindquarters. "Dagging" is the process by which farmers remove this wool.

[98] Edmund Pendleton, "A Declaration," *The Virginia Gazette*, December 16, 1775.

Though they knew the way, these escapees were caught before they could reach the two thousand other fugitives who joined Dunmore's service in the weeks after the proclamation. A group of white Warwick County residents pursued the canoe, fired upon the people inside, and "wounded two, one it is thought mortally."[99]

The mob had no military authority; Norfolk's militia was "badly armed" and the minuteman service intended to defend the colony from British incursions could not fill out its ranks.[100] Unlike the planters who dominated Norfolk society, these men likely did not own any human property themselves, nor would they have been among the merchants who snuck supplies to the British ships lingering in the Chesapeake Bay.[101] They were merely "our people," local residents seething over the British promise of emancipation and alliance for escaped enslaved people and a recent attack on a Mulberry Island patriot by British agents "with their faces blacked like *negroes*, whose *dear* companions they are." The patriot mob kidnapped the enslaved people and transported them to the Norfolk jail, where "it is expected the rest will soon be made examples of." The *Virginia Gazette*, which triumphantly reported the capture, turned in the following days with the first outbreak of hostilities between British and Virginian forces in the Battle of Great Bridge and did not follow up on what happened next. The captives may have been sent to the punishing lead mines along with other escapees who tried to reach Dunmore. More likely, they were hanged.[102] Many such stories pervade the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* in

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[99] *"A copy of the* OATH *extorted from the people of* Norfolk *and* Princess Anne, *by lord* Dunmore," *The Virginia Gazette*, November 30, 1775.
[100] "*Extract of a letter from a member of the continental congress to his friend in* Virginia, *dated* October 16, 1775," *The Virginia Gazette*, November 1, 1775.
[101] James Corbett David, "A Refugee's Revolution, 1775–1781," in *Dunmore's New World: The Extraordinary Life of a Royal Governor in Revolutionary America—with Jacobites, Counterfeiters, Land Schemes, Shipwrecks, Scalping, Indian Politics, Runaway Slaves, and Two Illegal Royal Weddings* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 101.
[102] "Williamsburg, December 2," *The Virginia Gazette*, December 2, 1775; *"A copy of the* OATH *extorted from the people of* Norfolk *and* Princess Anne, *by lord* Dunmore," *The Virginia Gazette*, November 30, 1775.

late 1775. The paper that had once platformed authors suspicious of popular violence now uncritically relayed a skirmish incited by a uniformless mob of ordinary whites.

The now-familiar values of life, liberty, and property were not separate, but constituted one another in Revolutionary Virginia. Patriotism formed the nexus between all of these. Life was in pursuit of liberty, liberty was property ownership, and the people relegated as property in Virginia posed the preeminent threat to white life and liberty. Only by embracing the virtues of a true patriot could white men secure all three of these values. A patriot valued his liberty enough to defend it with arms, yes, but the fundamental violence of patriotic ideology in Virginia was not merely martial, nor was it to be found in an unruly mob. The true violence inherent in Virginian patriotism was its role in justifying enslavement. Violence against enslaved Black people in defense of white liberty was a prosaic feature of life in the colony, but the imperial crisis and the coming of the American Revolution in Virginia prompted unusual debates about white intraracial violence. Whites fulminating on the patriotic, liberty-loving character of Virginia saw no contradiction between patriotism and enslavement because there was none. White liberty existed at the cost of Black liberty. White life meant the subjugation of Black life. White patriots rejected as unthinkable the idea that the women and men who pursued Dunmore's offer of freedom and arms could not only share but also embody their enslavers' professed love of liberty.

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