

FIRST SHOTS IN THE SOUTH

Two weeks after the founding of the Continental Navy, a feud between a Royal Navy officer and a Virginia slaveowner turned the Revolution from a New England–based rebellion into a wider war.

BY ANDREW LAWLER

At dawn on the second day of September 1775, heavy squalls whipped through the Virginia port of Norfolk. HMS *Mercury* and *Otter* bucked in the ominously growing swells. The two small sixth-rate frigates, augmented by three commandeered merchant vessels, were the sum of the Royal Navy's presence in what was the oldest, largest, richest, and most populous British province in North America.

Most British ships and soldiers were 500 miles to the north, in Boston, which was besieged by the new Continental Army led by George Washington. After the 17 June Battle of Bunker Hill, both sides remained locked in a stalemate. South of Massachusetts, a tenuous peace reigned between the colonies and the mother country. In Philadelphia, the Continental Congress had imposed sanctions on Britain, but few openly backed the radical notion of independence.

By mid-morning that day, a full-fledged hurricane was churning through the southern Chesapeake Bay, turning the normally placid harbor between Norfolk and Portsmouth into a raging cauldron. The fierce wind and waves relentlessly drove the *Mercury* toward the muddy Portsmouth shore, as the crew of the *Otter*, anchored nearby, looked helplessly on.

In the afternoon, the 24-gun *Mercury* shuddered as she hit bottom, tilting dangerously on her port side as the surf pounded the exposed hull. Brackish water poured into the ship's belly. As the wind screamed across the slanted deck, a desperate Captain John Macartney ordered his soaked men to heave water casks and precious barrels of beer, rum, beef, and pork over the side, as well as the massive cooking stove. Others labored to haul the ship's heavy cannon to the starboard side. The grueling work paid off; by midnight, as the storm moved on, the frigate was grounded but intact.



Williamsburg: Patriot Hotbed

The 14-gun *Otter* came through the storm unscathed, but not her young captain. Matthew Squire had left Norfolk a few days earlier, boarding a small British tender called *Liberty*. He was cruising near the broad York River, about 30 miles northwest of the port, when the tempest hit. His crew was made up of an Englishman, two Scottish sailors, and three slaves, one of whom, “a small mulatto man” named Joseph Harris, served as pilot.

Squire’s mission was to find a suitable place to launch a military assault on the capital of Williamsburg, now under the control of Patriots. The royal governor, Lord Dunmore, had fled that summer from the capital and set up a base at the shipyard of Gosport, just upstream from the colony’s largest city and primary port, Norfolk. Though he had only 100 or so redcoats and a few dozen marines, the Scottish

June 1775: Lord Dunmore, the last loyalist governor of Virginia, flees to the man-of-war HMS *Fowey* as he escapes from Williamsburg, the capital now having become a revolutionary hotbed. By that fall, the situation would turn from heated words to gunfire.

earl intended to oust the rebels from the capital and reassert the Crown’s control.

Four out of ten Virginians were slaves. The *Otter*’s enslaved crewmen had risked severe punishment and even death by fleeing to Gosport. Harris, the pilot, was an experienced waterman who guided ships in and out of Virginia’s treacherous bays and rivers. He and his owner lived in Hampton, a small port at the end of the peninsula formed by the York and James Rivers, facing Capes Henry and Charles, bracketing the Chesapeake’s entrance into the Atlantic. One



Detail from a 1775 map showing the Virginia Capes region, where simmering resentments boiled over into a shooting war between Virginia Patriots and the irascible governor.

British customs official described the town as lying “upon a narrow creek, barred with sand at the entrance, and having only shoal water.”

The town was a hotbed of Patriot fervor, but Harris saw in the British presence a chance to achieve freedom. That summer, he had passed along intelligence on Patriot smugglers to George Montagu, captain of the 24-gun *Fowey* that was then preparing to sail to Nova Scotia. When Hampton Patriots learned of Harris’ spy work, the captain said they “threatened his destruction,” prompting the pilot to seek safety on board the *Fowey*, riding in the waters offshore known as Hampton Roads.

Montagu gave him a variety of tasks to perform and determined that Harris “always appeared very sober and prudent” and was extremely knowledgeable of local waters. He wrote to Captain Squire that the pilot was “a very useful person, especially in tenders,” the boats that “tended” larger vessels by shuttling goods and people. “I could wish strongly to recommend him to such indulgence as his endeavors may merit,” the departing officer concluded. Harris’ skill ultimately would save Squire’s life.

Shipboard Sanctuary for Those Fleeing Slavery

As the storm raged that September day, Harris miraculously managed to maneuver the tiny vessel into a nearby creek, beaching her close to shore so that all reached land safely—a testament to the pilot’s formidable seamanship. Their trials, however, were just beginning. The landing spot lay just a few miles from Hampton, where Harris was wanted for escaping his owner to serve the enemy. Squire, meanwhile, already was widely detested by local Patriots for granting refuge on board the *Otter* to slaves, whom they considered their valuable property.

Amid the soaking rain and swaying trees, the party agreed to split up to find shelter. Squire and Harris set off through

the woods, and the pilot guided them to the home of a friend who put them up for the night as the hurricane subsided. By morning, Patriot patrols had found the *Liberty*, stripped her of her arms and supplies, and set her afire. Soon after, they captured the crew, save for the captain and pilot, and marched them to Hampton for questioning. Squire and Harris, meanwhile, eluded the search parties, obtained a canoe, and boldly paddled past the entrance to Hampton harbor to return to Gosport.

By afternoon, they arrived among the shattered wharves and sunken merchant vessels. “The devastation at Norfolk was inexpressible,” reported one newspaper. A minister wrote that “houses were blown down; docks torn up; bridges carried away.” Squire was relieved to see the *Otter* still afloat. After several days of concerted effort, his ship and the governor’s flagship, the converted merchant vessel *William*, pulled the stranded *Mercury* into deeper water.

In the storm’s aftermath, a Hampton Patriot named Wilson-Miles Cary taunted Squire in a letter published in a local newspaper. He owned the two enslaved crewmen who had been on board the *Liberty*. They had escaped to Norfolk several weeks before, only to be recaptured soon after the hurricane and returned to their owner. Cary mockingly gave the captain “my warmest thanks for this very kind hospitable treatment of my two slaves.”

Squire responded that the destruction of the *Liberty* and her contents was an outrage and demanded compensation. Cary agreed—but only if Squire returned Harris and other refugees from bondage. The British officer was in no mood to turn over the very man who had twice saved him from disaster.

The feud escalated, and by 25 October 1775 Squire was ready to punish the Patriots. After a celebratory cannonade marking the 15th anniversary of King George III’s ascension to the throne, the captain climbed down the *Otter* gangway and boarded a waiting sloop. This was a shallow-draft, single-masted vessel, perhaps 60 feet long, on which typically would be mounted four cannon in the bow and six in the stern, all capable of launching six-pound cannonballs. The crew may have numbered three to four dozen. Another sloop, a schooner, and two pilot boats filled with British marines and black crewmen stood ready. The fleet consisted solely of vessels with drafts shallow enough to navigate in Hampton’s small roadstead.

The outgoing tide carried the small flotilla past Norfolk’s damaged wharves, down the Elizabeth River, and into Hampton Roads. On the opposite shore lay Hampton. At dusk, part of the convoy sailed into a small creek just to the east of town. According to a Patriot report, a party of redcoats landed and set fire to the home of a local and “took away a valuable Negro man slave and a sail from the owner.”



In the final year of royal control, Virginia had been embroiled in Lord Dunmore's War, brought on by the encroachment of settlers on western lands earmarked for native tribes. The war culminated in the October 1774 Battle of Point Pleasant—but as the Revolution was heating up in 1775, the frontier troubles erupted anew.

At dawn the next morning, Hampton's Patriots awoke to find the enemy vessels anchored about 300 yards off the mouth of Hampton River. Old boats sunk by the Patriots blocked the channel that led to the town, about a half mile inland. According to an account by Dunmore, a dozen militiamen led by George Nicholas, son of the colony's treasurer, came to the shore to reconnoiter.

Volleys from Ship to Shore

As with the early morning clash six months earlier on Lexington Green, there is no agreement on who pulled the trigger first. "So soon as the rebels perceived them," wrote Dunmore, Nicholas "fired at one of the tenders, whose example was followed by the whole party." A Patriot, however, blamed the British for "two volleys of musketry" aimed at the men on shore, who promptly fired back in self-defense. A tender's crew responded by launching a four-pound iron ball at the Patriots. For an hour or so, bullets and balls intermittently soared between the ships and shore to no apparent effect. But the brief skirmish marked the first shots between the British and Patriots south of Massachusetts.

The colonial militia eventually withdrew into nearby woods, either for cover or in hopes of drawing the landing party ashore. When the British did not follow, the thirsty Patriots retreated that afternoon to a town tavern. A messenger already was pounding up the road to Williamsburg to request Patriot reinforcements. It was dark by the time the rider galloped into the capital as a chill rain began to fall. He roused Colonel William Woodford, leader of the Second Virginia Regiment, who immediately mustered his men to hurry to the port's defense. If Hampton were lost, Virginia's capital of Williamsburg—a Patriot stronghold and command center—would be open to British attack.

The rain grew heavy as Woodford and his men made their way down a dark thoroughfare that quickly turned into a ribbon of thick mire. In the gray and drizzly dawn of 27 October, the soldiers struggled into Hampton's outskirts. Most of the town's wood-and-brick buildings clustered along its primary avenue, King Street, which ran directly to the wharves on the creek. The remainder stood along Queen Street, which intersected King Street just above the port area. A sturdy brick Anglican church anchored one end of Queen while the other was the site of a small shipyard. The tired men dried their drenched hunting shirts in the shelter of the church, while Woodford cantered down King Street to the harbor.

In the gloom of the autumn daybreak, the Patriot colonel made out British vessels riding in the bay, but all seemed quiet. He trotted a few miles to the home of his friend, Wilson-Miles Cary, to share breakfast. What he didn't know was that Squire's men had spent the wet night quietly sawing away at the hulks blocking the harbor entrance. Soon after Woodford rode off, five British vessels picked their way through the channel, anchoring just off the town's wharves. They caught the inhabitants completely by surprise; despite the previous day's events, no Patriot sentry was on duty to warn of the incursion.

"The people were so astonished at their unexpected and sudden arrival that they stood staring at them," Patriot John Page wrote Thomas Jefferson, who was then in Philadelphia. They "omitted to give the colonel the least notice of their approach." They also did not know Woodford was at breakfast with Cary, oblivious to the danger. Squire sent a message to shore warning "that he would that day land and burn the town," according to a *Virginia Gazette* report.

The distant roar of cannon brought the colonel and Cary to their feet, their meal forgotten. Woodford rode off, only to

find that “the people of the town had abandoned their houses,” Page explained to Jefferson, while “the militia had left the breastwork which had been thrown up across the wharf and street.” Another Patriot rout seemed imminent. “Col. Woodford showed a great deal of coolness of courage, presence of mind, and judgement in the engagement at Hampton,” Page wrote. The officer immediately turned his horse and galloped the three blocks to the church to gather his troops and deploy his secret weapon.

Enter the Long Rifles

The Patriot force included a contingent from the western county of Culpeper. They did not carry the Brown Bess muskets commonly used by British and Americans alike. Instead, they had adopted the more accurate long rifle introduced by Pennsylvania German immigrants in the 1740s. They were still so unknown up and down the East Coast that John Adams had to explain to his wife Abigail that these “peculiar” weapons fired a shot “with great exactness to great distances,” and their owners were “the most accurate marksmen in the world.” Spiral grooves inside the iron barrel made it possible to shoot game at more than triple the distance of a musket, and with greater accuracy.

That feature, however, made loading a more delicate and time-consuming task. While this was not a great disadvantage for a hunter in the woods, it could be fatal when facing men with muskets that could be reloaded more quickly. Nor could rifles be fitted with bayonets. Properly protected by other troops or by suitable shelter, however, riflemen could serve as highly effective snipers against a well-entrenched enemy or exposed crews on board ships.

At Woodford’s command, the Culpeper men grabbed their rifles and rushed out of the sanctuary and down King Street. One man would have carried their flag sporting a coiled rattlesnake with “liberty or death” above and “don’t tread on me” below. Some wore Patrick Henry’s stirring words “Liberty or Death” stamped on medallions or sewn across the front of their hunting shirts (a loose coat holding tomahawks and scalping knives and secured by a belt).

“Lord Dunmore is well acquainted with the skill of our riflemen” noted the *Gazette*. The previous year, the gover-



When the Royal Navy flotilla appeared off Hampton, Virginia, in October 1775, Patriot (and future Lieutenant Governor) John Page wrote Thomas Jefferson in Philadelphia, “The people were so astonished at their unexpected and sudden arrival that they stood staring. . . .”

nor had led a militia across the Appalachians to attack a Shawnee-led tribal coalition. “The Shawnees have borne testimony of the coolness of their aim,” the *Gazette* reported. A Virginia Patriot leader told Richard Henry Lee, a delegate at the Continental Congress, that the governor “is much afraid of the riflemen and has all his vessels caulked up on the sides, above men’s height.”

But Captain Squire had no experience with these frontier warriors and had not protected the sides of his small ships. As his crew hurled deadly iron projectiles, Colonel Woodford had the riflemen fan out among the crescent of buildings lining the harbor, “directing them to fire from the window, which they did with great spirit,” one newspaper account said. From these sniper’s nests they could aim at the British exposed on deck and then safely reload.

“The fire was now general and constant on both sides,” Page wrote. “Cannon balls, grapeshot,

and musket balls whistled over the heads of our men, whilst our muskets and rifles poured showers of balls into their vessels.” The British officers and crew found it hard to counter the rebel attack. “The sailors were not able to stand to their guns and serve them properly,” Page noted.

The firefight continued for more than an hour before a stunned Squire ordered a retreat. The desperate British sailors sliced through their anchor cables for a quick getaway, but one of the smaller boats lost control and drifted to shore. The commander, a Lieutenant Wright, was shot in the knee and jumped overboard with Joseph Harris, the pilot who already had twice escaped the clutches of his would-be captors. He helped Wright to land, where a black man and a white man scrambled to rescue the pair.

Taking careful aim, a rifleman shot the black man from 400 yards, but the others escaped into the surrounding woods. Lieutenant Wright was later “found dead on the shore,” according to Virginia Patriot Richard Henry Lee, but the indefatigable Harris had managed yet again to escape, returning to Gosport and Lord Dunmore’s service. The Patriots, meanwhile, captured five white men, including an indentured servant who had fled George Washington’s plantation of Mount Vernon, along with an unidentified woman and two slaves still on board the tender. The whites were

By His Excellency the Right Honorable JOHN Earl of DUNMORE, His Majesty's Lieutenant and Governor General of the Colony and Dominion of VIRGINIA, and Vice Admiral of the same.

A PROCLAMATION.

AS I have ever entertained Hopes that an Accommodation might have taken Place between GREAT-BRITAIN and this Colony, without being compelled by my Duty to this most disagreeable but now absolutely necessary Step, rendered so by a Body of armed Men unlawfully assembled, rising on His Majesty's Tenders, and the formation of an Army, and the Army now on their March to attack His Majesty's Troops and destroy the well disposed Subjects of this Colony. To defeat such treasonable Purposes, and that all such Traitors, and their Abettors, may be brought to Justice, and that the Peace, and good Order of this Colony may be again restored, which the ordinary Course of the Civil Law is unable to effect; I have thought fit to issue this my Proclamation, hereby declaring, that until the aforesaid good Purposes can be obtained, I do in Virtue of the Power and Authority to ME given, by His Majesty, determine to execute Martial Law, and cause the same to be executed throughout this Colony; and to the end that Peace and good Order may the sooner be effected, I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms, to submit to His Majesty's STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitor to His Majesty's Crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the Penalty the Law inflicts upon such Offences; such as forfeiture of Life, confiscation of Lands, &c. &c. And I do hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His Majesty's Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to His Majesty's Crown and Dignity. I do further order, and require, all His Majesty's Free Subjects, to retain their Quarters, or any other Taxes due or that may become due, in their own Custody, till such Time as Peace may be again restored to this at present most unhappy Country, or commanded of them for their former Military Purposes, by Officers properly authorized to receive the same.

GIVEN under my Hand on board the Ship WILLIAM, - of NORFOLK, the 7th Day of NOVEMBER, in the SIXTEENTH Year of His Majesty's Reign.

DUNMORE.

(GOD save the KING.)



PORTRAIT BY SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS (1765)

As the unrest in Virginia spiraled further, the governor issued “Dunmore’s Proclamation” from the deck of a ship in November 1775, declaring martial law and offering freedom to “all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others . . . that are able and willing to bear Arms.”

“treated with great humanity” while the slaves were “doubly confined” to “stand trial for life.”

Lee informed Washington—a former close friend of the governor—that Dunmore’s “banditti” had been handily repulsed. “If the devil inspired them to come onshore” again, he added, “I make no doubt, but we shall have a good account of them.” A Patriot report boasted that they “had not a man wounded.” Even Dunmore admitted “the loss of the rebels must have been very inconsiderable if they suffered at all,” though one merchant later claimed that one Patriot was killed and another badly wounded. The cannonade made a good deal of thunder and smoke, but damage to the town was surprisingly light. One local reported “a few windows broke, and a door panel.”

‘Die or Be Free’

Elated Patriots crowded the King’s Arms, Bunch of Grapes, and Lower Brick taverns. “The troops in this town are in high spirits,” one observer noted—those spirits no doubt including the spirit of rum. “Lord Dunmore may now see he has not cowards to deal with.” A triumphant report published in Williamsburg asserted that “officers and soldiers of the regular, minute, and militia acted with a spirit becoming freemen and Americans.” The victory proved, the article boasted, that “Americans will die or be free.” A

chastened Captain Squire steered his battered fleet back to Norfolk’s harbor. Moaning men and silent corpses littered the bloody decks. Accounts say that up to 21 British were killed.

Since the June battle of Bunker Hill, the Patriots had had little to show from their confrontation with the British. The victory at Hampton provided a small but welcome morale boost. More importantly, it extended the war beyond New England. “Lord Dunmore has commenced hostilities in Virginia,” Jefferson wrote from Philadelphia on hearing of the battle. “It has raised our country into a perfect frenzy.” What had begun in Boston was now a continental fight. ⚓

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