

THE OLD PRESBYTERIAN MEETING HOUSE CONGREGATION AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



This account of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House congregation and the American Revolution is drawn from a history of our congregation now in preparation – *Alexandria’s Old Presbyterian Meeting House from Colonial to Modern Times: A Congregation of “Uncommon Liberty, Hospitality, and Kindness.”* It covers events relating directly to the American Revolution during a period that extends from the 1760s – a decade that proved to be the turning point in relations between the mother country and many of her British Colonial America subjects – through October 1787, when Alexandrians petitioned their support of the proposed U.S. Constitution. Eighty-seven persons who were congregation members during this period are known to have been patriots, i.e., they performed revolutionary acts that were of a magnitude that they might have been hanged had the war for independence been lost. Forty-three of them lie in the churchyard burial ground, which includes the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution, and in our Presbyterian Cemetery and Columbarium, one mile west of the churchyard.

Two quotations serve to introduce this revolutionary period in our history. The first contains the response of twenty-four-year-old Nicholas Cresswell, a loyalist, to worship services at the Meeting House in November 1774. This was two months after the first militia unit had been organized in northern Virginia and days after an effigy of Lord North, British Prime Minister, had been carried about town in great public parade, shot at, and burned – “[I] went to a Presbyterian meeting [i.e., worship service in Alexandria]. These are a set of rebellious scoundrels, nothing but political discourses instead of Religious Lectures ... [I] went to church [on another occasion] but won’t go any more to hear Political Sermons ... [the local Presbyterian preachers] are mere retailers of politics, sowers of sedition and rebellion, [who] serve to blow the coals of discord and excite the people to arms ... the Presbyterian clergy are particularly active in supporting the measures of Congress from the Rostrum, gaining proselytes, persecuting the unbelievers, preaching up the righteousness of their cause and persuading the unthinking populace of the infallibility of success. Some of these religious rascals assert that the Lord will send his angels to assist the injured Americans. They gain great numbers of converts and I am convinced [that] if they [i.e., the colonists] establish their Independence that Presbyt[erians] will be the established religion on this Continent.”

The second quotation dates from June 1775, a month after the armed conflicts at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, occurred. It is from the pastoral letter issued by the Presbyterian Church in British Colonial America to be read before each congregation. It stated, in part – “Hostilities, long feared, have now taken place; the sword has been drawn in one province [the Province of Massachusetts Bay], and the whole continent, with hardly any exception, seem determined to defend their rights by force of arms. If, at the same time, the British ministry shall continue to enforce their claims by violence, a lasting and bloody contest must be expected.

Surely, then, it becomes those who have taken up arms, and profess a willingness to hazard their lives in the cause of liberty, to be prepared for death, which to many must be certain, and to every one is a possible or probable event.”

Twelve long and difficult years would pass before Alexandrians would join in petitioning their unanimous support for an independent nation to be governed by the U.S. Constitution.

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The transition of Virginia from an overseas colony of Britain into the Commonwealth of Virginia in an independent United States of America stands as one of the four most important events in the history of the congregation.¹ Many of the records that one would like to draw upon to establish details of this historic moment have been lost. Sufficient information exists, however, to provide a reasonable representation of participation in the many different activities that drove the struggle for independence.² We know about the clergy, including the Reverends William Thom and Isaac Stockton Keith, who served as the congregation’s installed ministers during this period, and those ministers who served the congregation on a part-time basis. Based upon Reformed theology and the records of other Presbyterian congregations, it is not surprising that the Presbyterians in Alexandria may well have received “nothing but political discourses” during this period, as was reported by a contemporary resident of the period (Cresswell 1924).³ We know that congregation members engaged in early efforts to alter relations between the colonies and the mother country – many signed the nonimportation agreements that circulated in the colony beginning in 1770. They also served on various forms of revolutionary local governance bodies – town committees, committees of safety, committees of correspondence, and as common councilmen and local justices. Members who were merchants also served as commissaries and quartermasters to armies in the field throughout the struggle.

Participation in the revolutionary enterprise also included service in the armed forces – initially these were militia units formed locally, such as the Fairfax County Independent Company of Volunteers (also known as the Independent Company of Fairfax County and

¹ The other most important events all relate directly to the congregation – its formal establishment in 1772; its dissolution in 1899; and its re-establishment in 1949.

² Accounting for the engagement of the congregation and its members in Virginia’s struggle to transition from a British overseas colony to a commonwealth/state in an independent nation is challenging as numerous period records have yet to re-emerge and the formal service records of the period’s Alexandria and Fairfax County militia units have been lost. Numerous efforts have been undertaken to compile lists of those Virginians who served in the armed forces (Mitchell 1975, Selby 1988, Eckenrode 1989, Heitman 1914, Burgess 1973, Gwathmey 1973, Cecere 2007, Peters 2008, McAllister 2009, revolutionarywar.us/continental-army). The Commonwealth of Virginia, in conjunction with the Virginia Society Sons of the American Revolution, has prepared its own list of those who served and are known to be interred in Virginia burial grounds (Virginia General Assembly 2001).

³ Reformed Protestant theology dating from the time of John Calvin (1509-1564), taught that because all people, including public officials from local magistrates to royal and religious leaders, are fallible and therefore might come to act in arbitrary, tyrannical or coercive manners, people have rights to question their authority, including taking actions such as a “just war” to terminate their rule” (Calvin 1956, Thornton 1860, Heimert 1966, Bailyn 1992, Morgan 1967, Hatch 1977, Lambert 2003, Larson 2009, Gardiner 2013, Fulford 2014, Costanzo 2020).

Alexandria, or simply as the Independent Blues) or the Alexandria Artillery; and then later in regiments of the Virginia Line of the Continental Army; and in the Virginia Navy (Terrell 1871, Mitchell 1975, Holton 1999 2018, Cecere 2007, McDonnell and Holton 2000, McDonnell 2007, Lepore 2018).

In December 1775, many Alexandrians who had volunteered to serve in local militia units were transferred to Virginia's newly formed Third Regiment of Foot of the Continental Line, which had been recruited in Alexandria and Fairfax County.⁴ It saw action in the New York and New Jersey Campaign of 1776-77, which included more than a dozen individual engagements, including the Battle of Harlem Heights, the Battle of Long Island (Battle of Brooklyn Heights), crossing the Delaware River at Christmas to engage in the Battle of Trenton, the Battle of Princeton, and winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey. The unit also participated in the Philadelphia Campaign of 1777-78, which included the Battle of Brandywine, the Battle of Germantown and wintering at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Late in the war, it participated in the disastrous Siege of Charleston, South Carolina, where British forces captured five thousand Americans (revolutionarywar.us, Terrell 1971, Mitchell 1975, Cecere 2004, Peters 2008, Holton 2021).⁵

Congregation members served as enlisted men of all ranks. They also served as officers, doctors, and surgeons, including –

General Daniel Roberdeau spent most of the war years in Philadelphia, where he served as commander of the Pennsylvania Associators Volunteer Militia. He also provided provisions from his Alexandria business.

Colonel James Hendricks initially served as Captain and commanding officer of the Independent Company of Fairfax as reconstituted in March 1775, then as Major and Lieutenant Colonel (commander) of the Sixth Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, as Colonel (commander) of the First Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, Continental Army, and as quartermaster in Alexandria.

Colonel Charles Simms served as Major of the Twelfth Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, as Lieutenant Colonel of the Sixth Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, and as Colonel of the Second Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, Continental Army.

Colonel Lewis Nicola established and commanded the Continental Army's Corps of Invalids. Lieutenant Colonel John Allison served with the First Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, Continental Army.

Major George Johnston, Jr. served as Captain of the Second Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, as Major of the Fifth Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line,

⁴ Local militia units operated independently until summer 1775, when the Third Convention took steps to restructure the colony's militia by organizing its independent bodies into formal regimental units (Cecere 2007). The Continental Congress formed independent units from throughout the colonies into fifteen regiments (the First through the Fifteenth), to establish the "Continental Line," plus Dragoon, Artillery, Minutemen, and supporting units. Virginia's regiments would be reorganized several times during the war.

⁵ During the month of December 1776, a week prior to Washington's Christmas attack on the British at Trenton, New Jersey, Thomas Paine contributed to rallying support for the war effort with publication of the first of a series of pamphlets titled *The American Crisis*. The first issue, which General Washington directed to be read to his troops prior to crossing the Delaware River, contains the now-famous words – "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman" (*The American Crisis* 19 December 1776, Philadelphia: Printed by Styner and Cist).

Continental Army, and as aide-de-camp to General George Washington, Commander in Chief, Continental Army.

Captain David Arell served as First Lieutenant and then Captain with the Third Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, Continental Army.

Captain Dennis Ramsay served with the Independent Company of Fairfax and the Virginia Continental Line.

Captain William Ramsay served as commanding officer of the Independent Company of Fairfax at its formation in September 1774.

Ensign John Dundas served with Third Company, Second Battalion, Philadelphia militia.

Cadet George William Carlyle served with Lieutenant Colonel William Washington's Third Regiment of Continental Cavalry, Continental Army.

Dr. James Craik served as Assistant Director, flying camp hospital, New York, 1776; Assistant Director of Hospitals (Surgeon General), Middle District [Department], Continental Army, including serving with General Washington at Valley Forge during winter 1777-78; Chief Hospital Physician and Surgeon; and Chief Physician and Surgeon of the Army (Surgeon General), Continental Army. A steadfast friend of George Washington since the Seven Years' War (French and Indian War), he was a confidant of Washington's throughout the war.

Dr. William Brown served as Surgeon, Second Virginia Regiment; Surgeon General and Physician General of the Middle District [Department], Continental Army, beginning in spring 1777; hospital administrator while wintering with General Washington at Valley Forge during winter 1777-78; and Physician [and Director] General, Continental Army.

Dr. William Ramsay, Jr. served as surgeon on the privateer ship *General Washington*.

Dr. William Rumney served in Alexandria's military hospital, which had responsibility for inoculating troops passing from southern colonies to join the Continental Army operating in the north.

Dr. Stephen Cooke served as a unit surgeon.

Other congregation members who were doctors served as unit surgeons, and those who were merchants served as commissary officers.⁶

⁶ Daniel Roberdeau's business interests in Alexandria, which included a rum distillery on the waterfront, was producing "Alexandria Rum" by at least April 1775 (*Virginia Gazette* 14 April 1775). He spent most of the war years in Philadelphia and took up full-time residency in Alexandria after the war (Shomette 2003, Stapleton 1999-2002). His residence at 418 South Lee Street survives.

Lewis Nicola (1717-1807) was born in Dublin, Ireland, and served in the British Army for twenty-seven years. He was fifty-eight years of age when hostilities commenced and residing in Philadelphia. He initially assisted Pennsylvania's Council of Safety in preparing for war; he was appointed Philadelphia's town major in 1776; and he was appointed by the Continental Congress to direct the Corps of Invalids/Invalid Regiment in 1777. He was a founding member of the American Philosophical Society and prepared several military instruction manuals during the war. He relocated to Alexandria in 1798 where he died (Bell 1997-99, Cubbison 2013).

Charles Simms (1755-1819) was a lawyer who served several terms in Virginia's House of Delegates; served as a delegate to the Virginia Ratification Convention that voted to adopt the U.S. Constitution; and served as mayor of Alexandria and collector for the U.S. Customs Service after the Revolutionary War.

George Johnston, Jr. (1750-1777), was the son of George Johnston, Sr. (1702-1766) and his second wife, Sarah McCarty (1724-1785). He participated in crossing the Delaware River and the attack on Trenton, New Jersey, in December 1776, then became aide-de-camp to General Washington. He died at Morristown, New Jersey, on 29 May 1777. The family residence at 224 South Lee Street survives.

David Arell (1740-1792), son of Richard and Eleanor Arell, who donated land for the congregation's churchyard, was a tavern owner, lawyer, justice, and mayor of Alexandria. His residence at 219 South Lee Street survives.

Participation in these rebellious activities would make them patriots to Americans; but, should the Americans have lost their fight for independence, it might have meant that many of them would have been considered traitors – as such, they could well have lost their lives. A few might also have been celebrated for their loyalty to the crown had the rebellion failed. The following table lists the names of eighty-five congregation members known to have been patriots in the struggle for independence.⁷ –

Dennis Ramsay (1756-1810), son of William Ramsay (1716-1785), who was one of Alexandria's original trustees, was a merchant, tavern-keeper, justice, and mayor of Alexandria. His residence at 221 South Lee Street survives.

John Dundas (1759-1813), son of James Dundas (1734-1788), a Philadelphia merchant who had emigrated from Perthshire, Scotland in 1757, relocated to Alexandria following the war. He married Agnes Hepburn (1770-1820) in 1785; owned a wharf and warehouse with William Hepburn on the waterfront; operated mills in Dumfries and Fairfax County; exported flour; and also served as a member of the common council, as mayor, and as a member of the church committee.

George William Carlyle (1764-1781), eighteen-year-old son of John Carlyle, merchant and one of Alexandria's founding trustees, was killed at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, South Carolina, on 8 September 1781 (Hill 2004, Holton 2021). The family residence at 121 North Fairfax Street survives and is open to the public as a house museum.

Dr. James Craik (1730-1814) was the son of William Craik (1703-1798) of Arbigland estate, near Dumfries, Scotland. He studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh and served as a British army surgeon in the West Indies. He was practicing medicine in Winchester, Virginia, when he became a surgeon in the Virginia Provincial Regiment, first met George Washington, and served in General Braddock's army in 1754. He relocated to Alexandria in 1784 (Mitchell 1975, Mayo 1987, Gordon 1929c, Moore 1929, Duncan 1931, Morris 1938, Risch 1981, Gillett 1999-2002 2004, Roberts 2017, Bish 2023). John Paul Jones (1747-1792), who would become a naval commander in America's war for independence, was also born at the Arbigland estate, where his father served as groundskeeper. Dr. Craik attended both George and Martha Washington at their deaths. His town house at 210 Duke Street survives.

Dr. William Brown (1748-1792), son of the Rev. Richard Brown of Port Tobacco, Maryland, was born in Haddington, Scotland, while his father was pursuing theological studies there. He moved to Alexandria following the completion of his medical studies at the University of Edinburgh in 1770 (Duncan 1931, Estes 1999-2002, Cowen 1997, Risch 1981). In addition to serving as surgeon for the Second Virginia Regiment and in hospital administrative duties – Surgeon General and Physician General of the Hospital, Middle District, Continental Army for three years during the war, he published *Pharmacopoeia... [Formulary of Simple and Efficacious Remedies]* (1778, 1781), a thirty-two-page guide to natural medicinal plants for surgeons and medical officers in the Continental Army (Mitchell 1975). His residence at 212 South Fairfax Street survives.

Dr. William Ramsay, Jr. (c1744-1795), eldest son of William and Ann McCarty Ramsay; attended the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), which studies George Washington assisted in financing; and studied with Dr. Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia. During the war, he served as surgeon on the twenty-gun *General Washington*, a privateer, which became active in 1780 and made multiple crossings of the Atlantic Ocean until retiring in 1784 (McLachlan *et al.* 1976-91, McAllister 2009, Dolin 2022).

Dr. William Rumney (unknown-1783) was born in Northumberland, England; moved to Alexandria in 1763 following service with the British army in the Seven Years' War; and was employed by George Washington for many years as physician for the enslaved persons working his farms (Duncan 1931).

Dr. Stephen Cooke (1751-1816) returned to Alexandria following the war's conclusion and then relocated to Leesburg, Virginia, about 1810 (Kaye 1988).

"Commissary officers" and "quartermasters" were not formal members of militias or of the Continental Army, but rather civilians who secured provisions for the military units (Risch 1981).

⁷ Revolutionary War patriots whose names appear in these lists were identified using the guidelines established by the National Society Sons of the American Revolution (SAR), with the exception of Ann McCarty Ramsay. These guidelines consider the contributions that people made to the various efforts to gain independence, e.g., signing the *Declaration of Independence*; being a member of a Continental Congress; military or naval service; direct engagement in rebellious actions locally such as signing a nonimportation agreement, serving on a Committee of Correspondence, being a minister known to be in sympathy with the cause for independence, rendering material aid

Congregation Members Who Were Patriots in the American Revolution

Patriots Who are Interred in the Churchyard Burial Ground or the Presbyterian Cemetery
and are Listed on the Memorial Plaques Placed There by the Sons of the American
Revolution and the St. Andrew's Society⁸

Robert Allison, David Arell, Samuel Arell, Robert Bailie, William Bartleman, John T. Brooks, John Carlyle, Samuel Craig, James Craik, Joseph Dean, John Dunlap, Andrew Fleming, James Gillies, David Graham, John Harper, William Harper, John Hunter, William Hunter, James Irwin, Dennis McCarty Johnston, James Kennedy, John Kincaid, William Ladd, James McFadden, Charles McKnight, William McKnight, James Mitchell, William Mitchell, William Newton, Lewis Nicola, Henry Nicholson, Thomas Porter, Dennis Ramsay, Henry Rose, Thomas Simms, William Henry Smith, Charles Spooner, John Stewart, Jesse Taylor, Unidentified Soldier, John Westcott, James Wilson, and Robert Young

Patriots Who are Interred in the Churchyard Burial Ground or the Presbyterian Cemetery
But are Not Listed on the Memorial Plaques Placed There by the Sons of the American
Revolution and the St. Andrew's Society or are Known to be Interred Elsewhere

Robert Adam, John Allison, David Black, William Brown, George William Carlyle, Stephen Cooke, George Washington Craik, Thomas Crandell, James Cushing, John Dalton, Elisha Cullen Dick, John Dundas, Abraham Faw, Joseph Greenway (also Greenaway), Jonathan Hall, James Hendricks, George Johnston, Jr., William Johnston, James Keith, Henry Lyles, William Lyles, Thomas Lewis, Charles Little, Robert M. McCrea, Colin McIver, Robert Mease, William Patton, William Ramsay, Ann McCarty Ramsay, William Ramsay, Jr., Daniel Roberdeau, William Rumney, Lawrence Sanford, John Short, Charles Simms, Thomas

such as furnishing supplies, etc. (www.sar.org/Membership/Acceptable_Service_for_Patriots; accessed 30 August 2013). Several African American freedmen from Alexandria also served, including John Pipsico (circa 1760-1842), whose family member, Thomas Pipsico, would be married to Alice Payne by the Rev. Elias Harrison in January 1846 (U.S. Secretary of War 1991, O'Keefe 2020).

Philadelphia's Third Presbyterian ("Old Pine") Church, led by the Rev. George Duffield (1732-1790), who served as chaplain of the Continental Congress, saw six hundred and seventy-two men enter military service (W. Taylor 2018).

⁸ Memorial plaques containing the names of members who were patriots and buried in either the churchyard burial ground or the Presbyterian Cemetery and Columbarium are located at those two sites. Their creation was sponsored by the Sons of the American Revolution and the St. Andrew's Society. The one in the churchyard burial ground was erected in 2006; the one in the Presbyterian Cemetery and Columbarium, one mile west of the churchyard, was erected in 2008. The two plaques include the names of forty-three people (including the unknown soldier) who are recognized as patriots by the Sons of the American Revolution and the Commonwealth of Virginia (Virginia General Assembly 2001).

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution in the churchyard burial ground honors an unidentified Revolutionary War soldier whose remains were unearthed in 1826 and reinterred at its current location during the 1920s. The memorial to the Unknown was proposed by Mary Gregory Powell (1847-1928) in conjunction with the restoration of the Meeting House – it was erected under the sponsorship of the National Society Children of the American Revolution in 1929 (details are in Chapter 7). Wreath laying and other memorial ceremonies are conducted at the memorial throughout the year.

Triplett, Unidentified Soldier from Kentucky, Andrew Wales, William Ward, Josiah Watson, John Winterberry, and John Yost

As many of Alexandria's Presbyterians were from Scotland, the northern counties of England, or were Ulster Scots from Ireland, they were accustomed to dealing with questions relating to fitting into Virginia's mainstream English-origin culture and institutions, a lifeworld that was dominated by the wealthy plantation owners of the southern tidewater region (Mitchell 1983). Most of Alexandria's Presbyterian families had emigrated directly from Scotland's lowlands or northern England or were a generation or two removed from there. While the areas from which they emigrated were part of Britain, they were geographically, culturally, and socially outside the mainstream of English society (Landsman 2010). While Scots had become "British" with the formal politically union of the parliaments of England and Scotland established by the *Acts of Union* (1706 and 1707), they remained outsiders in various ways for a host of reasons.

In the Colony of Virginia, Scottish merchants were considered by some, particularly the wealthy plantation gentry, to be little more than "greedy and manipulative" merchants (Tillson 2003, a more expansive account of similar attitudes may be found in Chapter 1). As Presbyterians, they were Dissenters or Nonconformists, the Church of England being the established denomination in the colony. Assessing the role of religion among Virginia's two largest groups of Dissenters – Presbyterians and Baptists – during the revolutionary period, one historian concluded –

Religious and political freedoms were sought by both denominations, with the former endeavor [by Presbyterians] beginning earlier and providing the atmosphere out of which the second [Baptists] could mature ... Virginia's dissenting evangelicals committed themselves to resistance to the mother country because their understanding of theology and philosophy told them that any government which denied them their God-ordained rights was guilty of tyranny and not worthy of their allegiance. From the doctrinal milieu in which they were schooled was born that body of truth which made religious freedom and political freedom inseparable.

They believed that the American cause was a divine one because, in the shadow of tyranny, Americans were covenanting together to resist Great Britain and to form a free government with stated powers and cognizant of God-given human rights. Dissenter clergymen preached a fundamental faith regarding human worth as children of God, the necessity of political freedom that there be no interference with God's working out His will within the life of the believer, and the justice of God's intervention in the affairs of men to the putting down of 'the mighty from their seats,' and the exaltation of 'them of low degree' [Luke 1.52]. Man's part, they believed, was to accept the will of God, follow the guidance of Scripture, and reject the worldliness that sapped the Christian's faith and vigor. Their dogma served as a catalyst to bind them together to their common purpose despite severe testing and near defeat. (Terman 1974)

Scottish merchants operating in both a commercial trade center such as Alexandria and smaller towns throughout the colony sought to address the numerous inherent constraints that Britain's mercantile economic system placed upon their engagement as independent entrepreneurs. Rightly, they perceived that Parliament, in which they had no voice, placed arbitrary and

artificial constraints upon them – the escalation of dissatisfaction with Britain’s governmental controls among the successful members of such a group was perhaps inevitable (Tillson 2003 2010, Coakley 1948, Shy 1998, Rothbard 2011, Musselwhite 2019).⁹

Overall, the transition to becoming a – “continental,” “revolutionary,” “Whig,” “patriot,” “radical,” or “rebel” rather than remaining true to the crown – a “loyalist,” “Tory,” or “King’s man,” apparently occurred fairly rapidly in Alexandria, with few persons remaining loyal to the crown. In general, colonial-era merchants (like persons engaged in commerce and finance at other times) preferred stability to the uncertainty of political unrest. In addition, the existing mercantile economic system meant that most merchants in the colonies were still acting as agents of commercial houses located in Britain (Klingenmaier 2015).¹⁰

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, in his early twentieth-century investigation of the role of merchants during the revolutionary period set the tone for subsequent interpretations –

Threatened with bankruptcy by the parliamentary legislation of 1764-65, the merchants of the commercial provinces [colonies extending from Pennsylvania north through New England] were the instigators of the first discontents in the colonies. The small factor class [i.e., merchants] in the plantation provinces [colonies extending from Maryland and Delaware south to Georgia], by reason of the limited nature of their trade, had no interest in the adverse effects of this legislation, and because of their close connection with their British employers were not at this or any other time included, as a group, to lend support to the projects of the northern merchants. (Schlesinger 1918)

Focusing solely on Virginia merchants, Isaac Harrell reached similar conclusions during the 1920s – revolutionary activities in the colony, he said, “did not have the support of the merchant factors trading in the colony. The merchants in Virginia were loyalists” (Harrell 1926). More recently, Peter Mitchell’s account of loyalists in Virginia concluded that –

⁹ Scottish factors and merchants performed several necessary functions in sustaining Virginia’s plantation economy but typically remained outsiders of the social circles situated among the large plantation owners. By the emergence of the revolutionary era, Scottish merchants in urban centers such as Alexandria handled goods not only from local planters but also from farmers throughout a broad catchment area and from milling operations that they themselves sometimes owned (Holton 1999). They operated in an economic culture realm that was somewhat removed from the dominant gentlemen-planter class of much of the Northern Neck and Tidewater Virginia. Many of them opposed North America’s revolutionaries as they had personally benefitted markedly from the *Act for a Union of the Two Kingdoms of England and Scotland* (1706-07), but “those Scots who had lived in the colonies for long periods and were familiar with colonial politics tended to support the Revolution, even in areas of Loyalism. They supported the Revolution not because they were Scots; they supported the Revolution because they believed in the potential of the Revolution to challenge the corruption of the Old World and turn its back on the constraints of aristocracy and privilege” (Dziennik 2013). Like George Washington, many of Alexandria’s Scottish merchants were financially successful as a result of their business practices – this gave them the confidence to believe that they could be even more successful functioning independently of the existing colonial ties with the mother country (Lengel 2016, Berlau 2020).

¹⁰ Historians estimate that about twenty to twenty-five percent of the residents of the thirteen colonies, about 500,000 persons, remained loyal to the homeland. Fourteen British colonies, located on the north side of the continent (which eventually became Canada) and in the West Indies, did not join the thirteen who declared independence. Those persons who remained loyal to the crown in the thirteen seceding colonies have been largely overlooked, but it is worth noting that some 60,000 of them (together with 15,000 enslaved persons accompanying them), and at least 8,000 free African Americans, fled the rebellious colonies, mostly to settle in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Quebec (Sexton 2018, Jasanoff 2011, Taylor 2013).

When the Revolution came to Virginia, the merchants chose overwhelmingly to remain loyal to the Crown, whatever their feelings about the constitutional clash between colonies and mother country, the Scottish and English factors appreciated the benefits of the British mercantile system. Moreover, as outsiders, they had never been assimilated into Virginia's population; as Scots or Englishmen, they viewed the rebellion against the mother country as treason. Since the avenues to political power were closed to them, they had little stake in Virginia's struggle with the Crown which they viewed primarily as a political one.¹¹ (Mitchell 1965)

Each of these studies ignored the situation of Northern Virginia.

Alexandrians consideration of seeking to become independent from Britain was probably similar to the ways in which residents of urban centers in the Middle Atlantic and New England, locales that were also populated by numerous Scottish merchant princes, thought about it (Nash 1979, Landsman 2010, Mitchell 1965, Hannum 2024). Alexandrians also responded positively to the support of independence provided by George Washington and George Mason; to the receipt of "political discourses" at Sunday worship services; and to their being successful businessmen themselves with strong connections to other successful businessmen seeking greater fortunes. Alexandria's Presbyterians moved to join the push for independence unusually early.¹² They not

¹¹ Schlesinger singled out the opposition of Virginia's Scottish merchants to the formation of the radical Committees of Association, which were being established in response to the British blockade of Boston – "In Virginia the chief dissent to the Association came from the merchant and factor element, largely Scotch [*sic*] by nativity" (Schlesinger 1918). Scottish merchants in the Norfolk area did in fact remain loyalists (Mason 1994, Hannum 2024).

Contemporary research into both the turn of urban commercial classes and of residents of Virginia's Northern Neck toward independence draw opposite conclusions (Bridenbaugh 1971, Nash 1979, Carp 2007, Coakley 1948, Tillson 2003 2010).

¹² The unusual situation of having two important supporters of independence – George Mason and George Washington – within the local community cannot be understated; only much larger urban centers such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia saw the presence of such effective leadership in the revolutionary enterprise (Ferrari 1992).

Alexandria's exceptional situation within Virginia has frequently been ignored in historical research on Virginia. For generations, Alexandria was a commercial port town that was economically, socially, and culturally linked to a hinterland that extended along both sides of the Potomac River downstream and upstream into the Shenandoah Valley. It was also closely connected not only to commercial centers such as Baltimore, Philadelphia and other nearby ports, but with other ones located throughout the Atlantic realm. That said, merchants in British Colonial America's large commercial centers such as Philadelphia and New York tended to lag behind radicals within their communities in joining the cause of political independence; Boston was, of course, the exception (Doerflinger 1983, Friedman 2010). Alexandria merchants more closely followed the pattern of Presbyterian merchants in Philadelphia, who adopted the revolutionary cause earlier than did that town's Quakers (Oaks 1977, Doerflinger 1983, Jenkins 1995, Landsman 2010). The merchant class embodied the emerging commercial republicanism – "a more sensible and realizable alternative to earlier notions of civic virtue and a more just alternative to the theological-political regime that had long ruled Europe and its colonial periphery" (Lerner 1979).

Numerous factors among Presbyterians in Philadelphia, including ideology, self-interest, religion, and family, led them either to accept the status quo with the mother country or to promote revolution (Powell 1979). Presbyterians in New York City divided into nearly equal numbers between loyalists and rebels (Friedman 2010). Some rural agricultural portions of the Chesapeake region experienced the tragic consequences of sharply differing allegiances for protracted periods (Mason 1990, McConnell and Holton 2000). While it has been estimated that three-fifths of those residing in British Colonial America were neither active loyalists or patriots, these were definitely topsy times well before armed conflict occurred (McDonnell 2007).

Congregation members had direct business and financial associations with Scottish Presbyterians in Philadelphia, New York, and New England. They also had contacts through the Presbyterian Church, which had conducted annual

only signed on to several of the early boycott efforts but were involved both in radical local governance organizations from their creation and in the prosecution of boycott violators.¹³

It appears that all congregation members may not have been “rebellious scoundrels.” At least three – William Hepburn, Andrew Wales, and William Wilson, all merchants who had been born in Scotland – have been identified by some as loyalists. Two – William Hepburn and Andrew Wales – were arrested as loyalists and taken to stand trial in Williamsburg in May 1777. Hepburn and Wales were among six Alexandrians charged as loyalists in conjunction with an escape by nine known loyalists who had been jailed for a plot that called “for burning Alexandria and murdering the inhabitants” (Hazard 1777-78). The jailed loyalists escaped with the assistance of the loyalist Nicholas Cresswell. Among the seven persons accused of participating in the conspiracy were Hepburn and Wales. They were carted off to Williamsburg, where they sat in jail for two months; stood trial; and were acquitted of wrongdoing. They returned to Alexandria and seemingly became fully reintegrated into the life of the community (Hazard 1777-78, Cresswell 1924, McGroarty 1944, Van Landingham 1975, Hirschfield 1976-77, Kiker 2001, Pulliam 2011a, Peck 2014 2015 2016, Compeau 2023).¹⁴

The third member identified as a loyalist – William Wilson – served as the local agent for the mercantile house of William Wilson and Sons, of Glasgow, Scotland. He struggled with the idea of bearing arms against the mother country. He wrote to relatives in Scotland that it would – “go very much against me to sign [up]. But I must do it, or it will be impossible to live in the Province [i.e., colony of Virginia]. That a period [end] may be put to these disturbances between Great Britain and the Colonies is my most sincere wish” (Dobie 1896). By 1776 all of the employees at his business had quit, and he alone remained to protect the property of his Scottish employer. In March, feeling that he could not join the rebel cause, he returned to Glasgow by way Annapolis and New York City. After the colonies gained independence from Britain, he returned to Alexandria and renewed his local import/export business; operated an iron furnace and forge; dined with George Washington at least a dozen times; and also became completely

meetings of clergy and elders since 1706 – far more than just ecclesiastical affairs were addressed at such gatherings (Trinterud 1969, Leyburn 1976, Hart and Muether 2007, Valeri 2010a).

¹³ When Virginia’s General Assembly passed a law in 1779 enabling the personal property and real estate of persons found to be loyalists to be seized by the commonwealth, the total number of persons who would be prosecuted, or were believed to have fled Virginia during the revolutionary period, amounted to less than a dozen people (McGroarty 1944, Van Landingham 1975).

¹⁴ Ebenezer Hazard (1744-1817) was serving as Surveyor General for Post Offices and Post Roads of the Continental Congress when he visited Alexandria. He was researching possible new routes for the postal service (Hazard 1777-78). He was in Alexandria for only a day and is the only person to state that this group of “loyalists” planned to burn the town and murder its inhabitants – the formal charges remain a mystery. It is difficult to believe that William Hepburn and Andrew Wales, who continued as well-established Alexandria businessmen following the revolution and Hepburn, who was elected to public office, would plot to destroy their homes and businesses and to murder neighbors – they were probably arrested because others in the community thought that they were not yet sufficiently or publicly supportive enough of patriotic causes (Compeau 2023).

William Hepburn (1730-1817) and Andrew Wales (1737-1799), both originally from Scotland, were successful merchants and owners of considerable property. Hepburn owned a wharf and warehouse on the waterfront and operated a ropewalk and mill in the valley of Cameron Run; partnered with his son-in-law, John Dundas, and the mercantile firm of Hepburn and Dundas on King Street; and served on Alexandria’s common council. Andrew Wales established the region’s first brewery in 1770 and operated a tavern near the contemporary Wales Alley; he was a signer of the congregation’s incorporation petition in 1786; and was active in civic affairs. He also served in the local militia and assisted in foiling the raid by a British ship on Alexandria in 1781. Both of them had successful business and public careers following the war (McGroarty 1943 1944, Cox 1971, Shomette 2003, Tilp 2006, Peck 2014 2015 2016, Schreiber 2023).

reintegrated into the economic and social life of Alexandria. During the War of 1812, he negotiated with Captain William Gordon, commander of the Royal Navy's Potomac Fleet and lived to 1822 (Klingenmaier 2015).¹⁵

Events during the 1760s

The decade of the 1760s proved to be a turning point in relations between the mother country and many of her British Colonial America subjects. Britain had successfully secured dominance over the eastern portion of the North American continent with winning the Seven Years' War of 1754-63 (French and Indian War) but doing so had proven costly (Anderson 2000).¹⁶ The British government had incurred massive debts – it was Britain's most expensive war to that time and Parliament made the decision to exercise direct control over its colonies in North America and took steps to have her colonists assume more of the financial burden both of the war and of administering the colonies more generally, including the costs of maintaining ten thousand British regulars who remained stationed in British Colonial America after the war (Morgan 2012, Holton 2021).

In March 1765, Parliament passed what commonly came to be known as the Stamp Act, which required – “the British colonies and plantations in America [to pay taxes on certain items to assist in] defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing the same.” It took the name of “stamp act” as when the tax on an item was paid, the purchaser received a stamp as proof of payment. Many residents of the colonies did not respond positively to paying this tax, especially as it was perceived to have been imposed arbitrarily, they having had no representation in the political decision-making process that created the tax.¹⁷

Two months later, in May 1765, Virginia's House of Burgesses, led by Patrick Henry and Alexandria's George Johnston, Sr., passed a series of resolutions protesting the Stamp Act, which became known throughout British Colonial America as the *Virginia Resolves* (1765). Virginia's actions stirred others to act, e.g., a Stamp Act Congress convened with delegates from nine colonies (but not Virginia) in New York City in October 1765 to create a common response

¹⁵ William Wilson (unknown-1822) emigrated from Kilmarnock, Scotland in 1772, initially to work for a firm headed by Adam Stewart in Georgetown, Maryland (later District of Columbia). He shortly thereafter relocated to Alexandria and would be active in the business and general affairs of the community for the next half-century, as a merchant representing William Wilson and Sons of Glasgow; as director of both the Bank of Alexandria and the Marine Insurance Company of Alexandria; as secretary/agent for the Columbian Insurance Company of Alexandria; as charter member of the Alexandria Library Company; as president of the St. Andrew's Society; and as incorporator of the congregation in 1786. His family residence at 609 Oronoco Street survives (Dobie 1896, Klingenmaier 2015).

¹⁶ For various political reasons, the British government had generally employed a hands-off policy – salutary neglect – towards its colonies in North America prior to the Seven Years' War. Economic historian and libertarian Murray N. Rothbard summarized the transition period that would lead to the American Revolution this way – “Enjoying the blessings of salutary neglect, the American colonies had been able in the first half of the eighteenth century to ignore the *de jure* mercantilist restrictions and edicts of Great Britain and to flourish in virtual *de facto* independence from the mother country ... [Eventually it became] high time, the British imperialists felt, to cast off the restrictions of salutary neglect and to bring the American colonies to heel. It was that grand design that would precipitate the great conflagration of the American Revolution, and to bring a new kind of nation into being” (Rothbard 2011).

¹⁷ Alexandrians apparently did not engage in the levels of public protest that occurred in many other urban centers, perhaps because the stamps designating that taxes had been paid never arrived (Sweig 1978, Ferrari 1992). Local responses also varied depending on how successful local merchants were at smuggling (Oaks 1977).

to the act (Isaac 2011, Joyner 2013).¹⁸ In March 1766, one year after Parliament had passed the Stamp Act, it reversed itself and repealed the act as its administration – “would be attended with many inconveniences and may be productive of consequences greatly detrimental to the commercial interests of these kingdoms.” Lest the colonists think that Britain might be loosening its governmental reins on them, the *Declaratory Act*, passed by Parliament on the same day it repealed the Stamp Act, pointedly stated –

[S]everal of the houses of representatives in his Majesty’s colonies and plantations in America have of late, against law, claimed to themselves, or to the general assemblies of the same, the sole and exclusive right of imposing duties and taxes upon his Majesty’s subjects, and have ... passed certain votes, resolutions, and orders derogatory to the legislative authority of parliament, and inconsistent with the dependency of the said colonies and plantations upon the crown of Great Britain ... and that the King’s majesty by and with the advice and consent of the lords spiritual and temporal and commons of Great Britain in parliament assembled had, hath, and of right ought to have the full power and authority to make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the colonies and people of America, subjects of the crown of Great Britain, in all cases whatsoever. And be it further declared ... that all resolutions, votes, orders, and proceedings in any of the said colonies or plantations, whereby the power and authority of the parliament of Great Britain to make laws and statutes as aforesaid, is denied or drawn into question, are, and are hereby declared to be, utterly null and void to all intents and purposes whatsoever. (Acts of Parliament 1766)

Residents of British Colonial America were so relieved by repeal of the Stamp Act that they largely ignored the *Declaratory Act*. John Carlyle, writing to his brother in Britain proclaimed – “nothing appears but that our Mother Country intends well for us which we are obliged to her for” (Pulliam 2011a). In a pastoral letter to be read to congregations, the Presbyterian Church responded to Parliament’s actions with relief as well –

The Almighty thus provoked, permitted counsels of the most pernicious tendency, both to Great Britain and her colonies. The imposition of unusual taxes, a severe restriction of our trade and an almost total stagnation of business threatened us with inevitable ruin. A long suspense, whether we should be deprived of, or restored to, the peaceable enjoyment of the inestimable privilege of English liberty, filled every breast with the most painful anxiety. A gloomy cloud thickened over our heads, ready to burst upon us in a desolating storm. Had our gracious Sovereign, the present ministry and the British parliament been less wise, just and good, and had they, instead of yielding to a spirit of moderation, unhappily recurred to force, we shudder at the very thoughts of the consequences. We cannot look down the precipice on the brink of which we stood, without horror. We were not without reason apprehensive that the tumultuous outrages, which in some places attended a determined opposition to the disrelished statute, might provoke the resentment of the British legislature.

¹⁸ George Johnston, Sr. (1702-1766) was the son of Dr. James Johnston, who had emigrated to British Colonial America from Annandale, Scotland, home of Clan Johnston since the 1100s. George Johnston was born in Prince William County; became a lawyer; relocated to Alexandria during the early 1750s; served as town trustee; and served two terms in Virginia’s House of Burgesses. The family residence at 224 South Lee Street, and country seat, Belvale, on Telegraph Road in Fairfax County, both survive (Slaughter 1908, Moore 1922). He was the first person to own the land that Richard and Eleanor Arell conveyed to the congregation in 1773.

We therefore call upon you, who are the dear people of our charge, not only to acknowledge with joy and gratitude the general Providence of God, but also thankfully to adore that particular Providence, wherein, upon special occasions, he directs and controls the course of events by his immediate influence, and whereby he hath on the late interesting occasion, so signally appeared for our protection.¹⁹ (Presbyterian Church 1766)

While Parliament's initial efforts to engage its British Colonial America subjects into assuming some of the costs of administering their colonial governments failed, it was soon followed up with the *Townshend Acts* (1767), which imposed duties on a series of goods, including tea, wine, glass, lead, and high-quality paper. These duties raised the costs of each of these goods, which residents of the colonies were required by law to purchase solely from producers in Britain. Still larger protests ensued. In March 1768, Virginia's General Assembly endorsed a letter circulated by the General Court of the colony of Massachusetts that proposed uniting opposition among all the colonies to the new round of taxation efforts. The letter boldly declared the *Townshend Acts* to be illegal.²⁰ By October of that same year, British troops arrived in Boston to impose martial law on the unruly inhabitants of its Massachusetts colony. Shortly thereafter, Virginia's House of Burgesses passed resolutions condemning the stationing of British troops in Massachusetts, to which Royal Governor Dunmore responded by dissolving the House for the remainder of the year. By the close of the 1760s, boycotts of a variety of British-made goods had been initiated throughout the colonies.²¹

Events of 1770-72

¹⁹ While the Presbyterian Church expressed relief at the turn of events in this pastoral letter, its clergy were simultaneously exploring theological and traditional Reformed arguments to justify the necessity of action should British rule be deemed unjust (Endy 1985, VanDrunnen 2005-06, Haselby 2015, Taylor 2018, Pearl 2017, Smith and Hall 2017-18, Thompson 2019, Steward 2021). The Presbyterian Church also maintained direct relations with Congregationalists in New England between 1766 and 1775 to consider the – “preservation of the religious liberties of Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and other Christians threatened at the time by the schemes of some Episcopalians in the Colonies, [who were] aided by their friends in Great Britain ... to secure the appointment of diocesan Bishops in America ... [and to make] arrangements for the gathering of the laws and customs of the Colonies respecting religious liberty; for collecting the statistics of non-Episcopalians, with a view to showing that the prelatical element [i.e., those seeking to have bishops of the Church of England installed in the colonies] was greatly in the minority in America; and also for a report of the number and condition of colleges and other institutions of learning” (Presbyterian Church 1904, Armstrong 1960, Carté 2021). Several of the Presbyterian clergy who served as commissioners at the meetings with Congregationalists preached in Alexandria.

During this period, Providence, i.e., the belief that God acts as an active agent in the world to guide events toward ultimate divine purposes, was understood to favor not only the colonial enterprise in New England and Virginia but was broadly understood to favor efforts toward political independence (Bonomi 2003, Earle 1992, Hall 2004, Witham 2007, Guyatt 2007, McBride 2010, Valeri 2010a 2010b).

²⁰ Documentation that would reveal the transition of events during this important period in Alexandria do not survive. Philadelphia's experience during this period, which is quite well documented, including the roles performed by its Scottish Presbyterian merchants, reveals the sort of events that probably would have been occurring in Alexandria (Oaks 1977, Doerflinger 1983).

²¹ Royal Governor Dunmore, John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore (1730-1809), a Scot, arrived in Williamsburg to govern the Colony of Virginia in 1772 – he had previously served as royal governor of the Colony of New York.

George Washington, George Mason, and Richard Henry Lee of Chantilly plantation located to the southeast of Alexandria on the Northern Neck, drafted the *Virginia Association*, which was passed by the colony's House of Burgesses in summer 1769. It prohibited the purchase of numerous items produced in Britain. The boycott did not explicitly involve merchants, so many did not comply, and when Britain lifted duties on most imported products, the effort failed (Ragsdale 1996, Holton 1999, Lawler).

Entering the 1770s, the residents of British Colonial America grew increasingly frustrated with the actions of a government seated in far-away London and in which they were provided no formal representation. In spring 1770, the Virginia Nonimportation Association, composed of “Gentlemen of the House of Burgesses and the Body of Merchants [of Williamsburg],” convened in Williamsburg to prepare a document promulgating a boycott of certain goods produced in Britain (Ragsdale 1996). Members of the House of Burgesses who signed the document acted independently of their official positions in the House, but nonetheless produced an influential document, which included a dozen particular procedures and actions. This extract reveals its essence –

We his Majesty’s most dutiful and loyal subjects of *Virginia*, declaring our inviolable and unshaken fidelity and attachment to our gracious sovereign, our affection for all our fellow subjects of *Great Britain*, and our firm determinations to support, at the hazard of our lives and fortunes, the laws, the peace, and good order of government in this colony; but at the same time affected with great and just apprehensions of the fatal consequences certainly to follow from the arbitrary imposition of taxes on the people of *America*, for the purpose of raising a revenue from them, without the consent of their representatives; and as we consider it to be the indispensable duty of every virtuous member of society to prevent the ruin, and promote the happiness, of his country, by every lawful means, although in the prosecution of such a laudable and necessary design some unhappy consequences may be derived to many innocent fellow subjects, whom we wish not to injure, and who we hope will impute our conduct to the real necessity of our affairs. (Van Schreeven *et al.* 1973-83)

Copies of the document prepared by the Virginia Nonimportation Association circulated throughout the colony for people to sign and denote their willingness to comply with the agreement. Among the several copies that circulated in Fairfax County were the signatures of nineteen prominent landowners and merchants, including at least seven congregation members – Robert Adam, John Carlyle, John Dalton, Jonathan Hall, Henry McCabe, William Ramsay, and John Muir. John Dalton joined George Washington, George Mason, Peter Wagener, and John West in forming the local committee charged with enforcing the terms of the agreement. The Virginia Boycott, as it came to be known, would eventually fail, but – “the degree of support displayed in the first instance marks Fairfax County [and Alexandria] as an area where the inhabitants were ready and willing to support resistance to British control” (Sweig 1979b). With this massive public action of signing onto such an agreement, and attempting to enforce it, notice was served at the outset of the new decade that the potential for still-greater crises was already at hand.²²

Alexandrians were most certainly devoting attention to activities occurring in Boston, New England’s hotbed of discontent, which had been occupied by British soldiers since 1768, nominally to enforce the Townshend Acts. On 4 March 1770, a minor provocation between a

²² In July 1770, George Washington circulated seven broadside copies of the *Virginia Nonimportation Association* in Fairfax County, which 333 men signed – one-third of the county’s white adult male population. About half of the Scottish merchants signed the copy that circulated in Alexandria (Ragsdale 1996, Sweig 1979b). Subscribers agreed to – “sincerely and cordially accede thereto [i.e., the association agreement], and do hereby voluntarily and faithfully, each and every person for himself upon his word and honour, agree and promise that he will strictly and firmly adhere to and abide by every article and resolution therein [i.e., the association] contain’d according to the true intent and meaning thereof” (Bailyn and Smith 1970).

thirteen-year-old and a British foot soldier standing guard at the town's Customs House turned into a confrontation between a crowd of about three hundred protestors led by the African American freedman Crispus Attucks – eight British soldiers were dispatched to the scene to maintain public order. The soldiers fired into the crowd and six persons received wounds that led to their deaths. A subsequent trial; the publication of partisan politicized tracts and images of the “Boston Massacre” in Britain and throughout the colonies; and re-enactments for several years, furthered sentiment against Britain throughout British Colonial America (Archer 2010).

In 1772, Alexandrians no doubt also paid close attention to the deliberate attack led by prominent merchants of Providence, Rhode Island, on HMS *Gaspee*, a revenue schooner of the British government. The schooner was one of a score of such vessels that were purchased by the British government following the Seven Years' War to patrol the Atlantic Seaboard to cut down on smuggling and the evasion of paying proper customs fees by colonists – both activities were prevalent throughout British Colonial America including the Chesapeake region. The *Gaspee* was deliberately lured into shallow waters of Narragansett Bay, where it ran aground and a boarding party, which included leading citizens of the colony, attacked the ship, which was set aflame and destroyed. A Royal Commission of Inquiry investigated the situation, but no one was brought to trial. Accounts of the audacious act by Rhode Island colonists immediately spread to London and throughout British Colonial America – Alexandrians followed accounts of events in the *Virginia Gazette*, and George Washington, while in Williamsburg, paid for a display of fireworks to commemorate the affair (Park 2016, Holton 2021, gaspee.org; accessed 15 June 2022).

Events of 1773

Events occurring during 1773 continued to propel Virginia along a chaotic course filled with unprecedented events. In response to several actions taken by Parliament and colonial officials, in March, members of Virginia's House of Burgesses established a Committee of Correspondence to promote the exchange of information between Virginia and Britain's other North American colonies. In effect, it was an extra-legal shadow government – similar bodies were also being formed as independent decision-making bodies in the other colonies. Not surprisingly, Royal Governor Dunmore, responded to this act by dismissing members of the House of Burgesses but did not dissolve the institution.²³ Two months later, in May 1773, Parliament passed a new *Tea Act*, which placed a tax on all purchases of tea and granted exclusive rights for the distribution of tea in British Colonial America to the East India Company. In response to its enactment, Boston radicals organized the Boston “Tea Party” – an act of political protest. On 16 December 1773, more than three hundred chests of tea worth tens of thousands of dollars were dumped in the harbor and ruined (Carp 2010). A seventeen-year-old participant in that rebellious act, Thomas Porter, would relocate to Alexandria after the war and become a member of the congregation.²⁴

²³ In early November 1775, having dissolved the General Assembly and fled to a Royal Navy warship, Royal Governor Dunmore issued *Dunmore's Proclamation*, which declared martial law in Virginia and granted freedom to enslaved African Americans should they serve in the British Army. In fighting to retain the crown's control of its colony, Norfolk was largely destroyed (Mitchell 1965, Mapp 1981, Schama 2005, Holton 2021, Hannum 2024, Lawler 2025).

²⁴ Thomas Porter (1756-1800) was a merchant and member of Alexandria's common council. He and his wife, Sarah Ramsay (1752-1832), resided at 412 South Fairfax Street – the structure, a nice example of flounder-style architecture, survives. He was also a founding member of Alexandria's Library Company, Society for the Promotion

Events of 1774

The year 1774 brought forth still more events that previously would have been considered so radical that the possibility of their occurring would have been unimaginable. Such “unimaginable” events now took place with some frequency – in June, Boston’s harbor was closed to ships in an attempt to force locals to pay revenues on tea destroyed by the previous year’s Tea Party; in August, the colony of Virginia’s “First Convention [of Radicals],” convened as an explicit expression of self-government to function independently of the royal governor, Britain’s Parliament, and all other royal authority; in September, the first Continental Congress, with representation from all of the colonies except Georgia, convened at Philadelphia; and by the year’s close, the royal governor in Williamsburg had declared martial law, and Alexandrians were preparing for armed conflict.²⁵

In response to Boston’s Tea Party protest of late 1773, Parliament passed the *Port Act* in March 1774, which announced that unless proper compensation was made to the East India Company for the cost of the destroyed tea, and the proper tax revenues on the tea were paid to the Royal Treasury, the port of Boston would be closed by forces of the Royal Navy and the British Army on 1 June 1774.²⁶ In response to the pending embargo of Boston’s port, Virginia’s House of Burgesses on 24 May 1774 acted independently of Royal Governor Dunmore and called for a “Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer” to be conducted for members of the House in Williamsburg on the first day of June – the day the embargo of Boston’s harbor was to commence. The resolution calling for the day of prayer read, in part –

This House being deeply impressed with Apprehension of the great Dangers to be derived to *British America* from the hostile Invasion of the City of *Boston* in our Sister Colony of *Massachusetts Bay*, whose Commerce and Harbour are on the 1st Day of *June* next is to be stopped by an armed Force, deem it highly necessary that the first Day of June be set apart by Members of this House as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, devoutly to implore the divine Interposition for averting the heavy Calamity, which threatens Destruction to our civil Rights, and the Evils of civil War; to give us one Heart and one Mind firmly to oppose, by all just and proper Means, every Injury to *American* Rights, and that the Minds of his Majesty and his Parliament may be inspired from above with Wisdom, Moderation, and Justice, to remove from the loyal People of *America* all Cause of Danger from the continued Pursuit of Measures pregnant with their Ruin.

of Useful Knowledge, and Washington Society. Porter is interred in the churchyard burial ground. He is not the only person buried in Alexandria to have participated in Boston’s Tea Party – Samuel Cooper (1757-1840), who is buried in Alexandria’s Christ Church Cemetery on Wilkes Street, lived in Boston and participated as a sixteen-year-old (Heiby 2023a). Tea imported to British Colonial America was destroyed in at least a half-dozen other smaller port towns as well (Holton 2021).

²⁵ A series of four Virginia Conventions – “radical,” “illegal,” “alternative” legislative assemblies – would serve as the colony’s ersatz government until June 1776, when the Fifth Convention declared Virginia to be independent of Britain. In October 1776, the commonwealth’s General Assembly was formed – it immediately entered upon a period of revising laws carried over from the colonial period, a task spearheaded by the Committee of Revisors, composed of Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Pendleton, and George Wythe (Alden 1960-61, Lerner 1987).

²⁶ The *Port Act*, which applied only to Boston, was the first of several punitive actions taken by Parliament in 1774 that would collectively come to be termed the *Intolerable Acts* in North America and the *Coercive Acts* in Britain. Only firewood and food were permitted to be transported into the city after the embargo was initiated in June 1774; additional punitive restrictions would follow (Holton 2021).

Ordered, therefore, that the Members of this House do attend in their Places [of worship] at the Hour of ten in the Forenoon, on the said 1st Day of *June* next, in Order to proceed with the Speaker and the Mace to the Church in this City for the Purposes aforesaid; and that the Reverend Mr. *Price* be appointed to read Prayers, and the Reverend Mr. *Gwatkin* to preach a Sermon suitable to the Occasion.²⁷ (House of Burgesses of Colony of Virginia 24 May 1774)

In response to the Burgesses' show of support for Boston's radicals, Royal Governor Dunmore formally dissolved the House of Burgesses as a governing body on 26 May 1774.

Five days after the House's call for a day of prayer, Sunday, 29 May 1774, Alexandrians met to formally establish a Town Committee (also known as a Committee of Correspondence), its own extra-legal governing body, to consider local sentiments and to coordinate efforts pertaining to the immediate political crisis. The committee's sentiments at that moment were shared in a communication with Baltimore's Town Committee –

After acknowledging the receipt of your letter ... we called a meeting of the principal inhabitants of this town, who determined upon the choice of a committee, for carrying on such a correspondence, as we judged necessary for conveying our sentiments to the neighboring towns.

Notwithstanding the anxiety we felt for the unhappy situation of Boston, groaning under the lash of arbitrary power in the cause of all America, we determined to wait for the exertion of the well known spirit of our [colony's General] Assembly, at that time sitting, as we apprehended before we entered into any determination with regard to our conduct at this alarming crisis.

We are still obliged, in some measure, to wait the determination of our late representatives [to Virginia's House of Burgesses], though not in their legislative capacity. The governor, after their passing an order (a copy of which we enclose you) for setting apart the first day of June, as a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer, having dissolved them.

They [Alexandria's Town Committee] are determined to keep the day in the manner they [Virginia's House of Burgesses] proposed, and after that, it is expected will enter into some spirited associations, for procuring, as far as lies in their power, some relief for their distressed brethren in New England. (Van Schreeven *et al.* 1973-83)

²⁷ The Rev. Thomas Gwatkin (1741-1800), professor of mathematics and natural philosophy and master of the grammar school at the College of William and Mary, was a strong loyalist who declined the opportunity to preach. The Rev. Thomas Price (1733~1785), chaplain of the House of Burgesses, and also a loyalist accepted the challenge.

Thomas Jefferson and several younger members of the House of Burgesses decided to act in preparing the resolution as they – “were under [the] conviction of the necessity of arousing our people from the lethargy into which they had fallen as to passing events; and thought that the appointment of a day of general fasting and prayer would be most likely to call up and alarm their attention. No example of such a solemnity had existed since the days of our distresses in the war of [17]55, since which a new generation had grown up” (Love 1895, *Resolution of the House of Burgesses* at founders.archives.gov). Afterward, Jefferson thought that “the effect of the day, through the whole of the colony, was like a shock of electricity, arousing every man, and placing him erect and on his centre” (McBride 2010). George Washington attended the service conducted by Rev. Price in Williamsburg. A prayer service was conducted on 1 June 1774 in Alexandria as well (Alexandrians 1774).

The letter was signed by members of the Alexandria Town Committee, six of whom were congregation members – Robert Adam, John Carlyle, John Dalton, John Harper, James Hendricks, and William Ramsay (Waite 2012).²⁸

On 1 June, the British would indeed blockade Boston's harbor, after which residents of other harbor towns in Massachusetts stood by Boston and refused to allow goods from Britain to pass through their ports as well. Port towns throughout the other colonies responded to Massachusetts' situation by smuggling needed provisions into the blockaded ports. Alexandrians responded to the blockade on 6 July 1774. Its shipment of goods, organized by the new Town Committee, included a letter that was addressed to "the Honorable John Hancock, James Bowdoin, Samuel Adams, Isaac Smith, the Gentlemen Committee of Boston, and the industrious poor of the town of Boston" which read, in part –

All Virginia and Maryland are contributing ... for the benefit of those, the industrious poor of the town of *Boston*, who by the late cruel act of Parliament, are deprived of their daily labor and bread; to prevent the inhabitants sinking under the oppression or migrating; [and] to keep up that manly spirit that has made them dear to every *American*, though the envy of an arbitrary Parliament ... [A subscription has been raised of] two hundred and seventy-three pounds sterling, in specie, [equal to lawful] thirty-eight barrels of flour, and one hundred and fifty barrels of wheat ... [You should] be assured [that] *Virginia* and *Maryland* are determined to unite with the Colonies. Firmness and intrepidity is their character.²⁹
(Alexandrians 1774)

Also during July, in preparation for Virginia's First Convention, which was about to convene at Williamsburg, "Freeholders and Inhabitants of the County of Fairfax" gathered at Alexandria to articulate their own concerns regarding relations with the mother country. The document they prepared came to be known as the *Fairfax Resolves*. It presented a forthright and strongly worded statement of local sentiments expressed in twenty-six resolves – among which were ones pertaining to – "constitutional rights" regarding taxation; representation in elected governmental bodies; judicial power; renewed efforts regarding the nonimportation of British goods; condemnation of the importation of slaves into the colony; and the issuance of a call for a

²⁸ During the latter months of 1774, Alexandria's Town Committee was folded into the Fairfax County Committee of Correspondence (Van Schreeven *et al.* 1973-83, Bowman 1971). Members of the local committee convened in coffee houses and taverns, just as the concerned citizens and legislators in Williamsburg had met at Raleigh Tavern once the colony's House of Burgesses was dissolved (Rice 1983, MacKaye 1995 2000, Gilbert 2016). Alexandria's Town Committee, together with those of Dumfries, Fredericksburg, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Williamsburg, were among the earliest independent governance committees formed in Virginia (Selby 1988).

²⁹ Excerpts from this letter were included in a thanksgiving sermon delivered by the Rev. William Gordon (1728-1807) at the Third Congregational Church, Roxbury, Massachusetts, on 15 December 1774 (Gordon 1775).

Alexandria would support the besieged residents of Boston at other times as well. In December 1774, in response to a call from the Continental Congress for non-consumption, nonimportation, and nonexportation of goods with Britain, Ireland, and the British West Indies, a shipment of linen from Ireland, imported to Alexandria, was seized by the local committee, and then sold at public auction. Owners of the goods were reimbursed for their costs and the profit of £5.10 from the sale was sent to Boston. Auction of the linens was handled by John Carlyle, William Hartshorne, and William Ramsay (Van Schreeven *et al.* 1973-83, Breen 2004, O'Keefe 2020). In November 1775, more than a year into the siege of Boston, Alexandrians sent "one hundred and fifty-seven-barrels flour ... fifty bushels of beans ... eleven barrels bread and five barrels of flour ... [on different ships, all paid for in full, including shipping, and] £53 13s 3d [cash, for distribution] among the deserving poor of *Boston*" (Residents of Fairfax County 1775b).

general congress of representatives from throughout British Colonial America (Residents of Fairfax County 18 July 1774, Hurd 1975, Ammerman 1974, Pulliam 2011).³⁰

The *Fairfax Resolves* initially appeared in print at Williamsburg. The document was conveyed directly to the First Convention when it convened in August by Fairfax County's two delegates – George Washington and Charles Broadwater. The document not only articulated grievances but named local residents, who were to form Fairfax County's quasi-governmental body – the Committee of Safety – which would – “on any emergency, have power to call a general meeting, and to concert and adopt such measures as may be thought most expedient and necessary.” The local committee was composed of twenty-five members, including George Washington, George Mason, Charles Broadwater, and seven congregation members – Robert Adam, William Brown, John Carlyle, John Dalton, Thomas Lewis, William Ramsay, and William Rumney (Stuntz 1969). The committee immediately coordinated with the two local legislators serving in the First Convention to express its wishes regarding the formation of a Continental Congress, which was expected to be convened at Philadelphia.³¹

In September 1774, George Mason took the lead in organizing the first militia unit in this area. George Washington, then in Philadelphia, joined in efforts to supply it (Cecere 2007, Schneck undated). Upon its organization, the Independent Company of Fairfax County and Alexandria, immediately to be known as the Independent Blues, declared –

Threatened with the destruction of our ancient Laws and Liberty and the loss of all that is dear to *British* subjects and freemen, justly alarmed with the prospect of impending ruin, firmly determined at the hazard of our lives to transmit to our children and posterity those sacred rights to which ourselves were born; and thoroughly convinced that a well regulated Militia, composed of the gentlemen, freeholders, and other freemen is the natural strength, and only safe and stable security of a free Government, and that such Militia will relieve our mother country from any expense in our protection and defence, will obviate the pretense of a necessity for taxing us on that account, and render it unnecessary to keep any Standing Army (ever dangerous to liberty) in this Colony, we the subscribers, inhabitants of *Fairfax* County, have freely and voluntarily agreed, and hereby do agree and solemnly promise, to enroll and embody ourselves into a Militia for this County, intended to consist of all the able-bodied freemen from eighteen to fifty years of age, under Officers of their own choice, and for that purpose to form ourselves into distinct Companies of sixty-eight men each ... we do each of us for ourselves respectively, promise and engage to keep a good Flintlock in proper order, and to furnish ourselves as soon as possible with, and always keep by us, one pound of Gunpowder, four pounds of lead, one dozen Gun-flints, and a pair of bullet moulds, [pouch,

³⁰ Often overlooked is the seventeenth resolution was one that addressed slavery. It not only demonstrates how important slavery was to Virginia's economy, but also the existence of genuinely radical thought in Northern Virginia – “Resolved that it is the Opinion of this Meeting, that during our present Difficulties and Distress, no Slaves ought to be imported into any of the British Colonies on this Continent, and We take this Opportunity of declaring our most earnest Wishes to see an entire Stop for ever put to such a wicked cruel and unnatural Trade” (Residents of Fairfax County 18 July 1774).

It is believed that the resolves were read and approved at the tavern owned by Richard Arell. Located in the area of the contemporary Market Square, it was demolished by the city's urban renewal program during the 1960s (Van Swearingen 1964-65, Maloney 2013).

³¹ Fairfax County's Committee of Correspondence, charged with responding to matters of concern more expeditiously than the larger Committee of Safety, included four congregation members – John Carlyle, John Dalton, John Muir, and William Ramsay. Other committee members were Richard Conway, George Gilpin, James Kirk, and George Mason (Stuntz 1969, Alexandrians 1775a).

cartridge box, bayonet, tomahawk, etc.] ... And that we will always hold ourselves in readiness, in case of necessity, hostile invasion, or real danger, to defend and preserve to the utmost of our power, our religion, the laws of our country, and the just rights and privileges of our fellow-subjects, our prosperity, and ourselves, upon the principles of the *English* Constitution. (Residents of Fairfax County 1775a [1774])

At its founding, the Independent Blues established an honor that it could hold forever – it was the first independent militia company to be formed in Virginia (Terrell 1971, White 1978, Cecere 2007, O’Keefe 2020). Its identification as “independent” made the distinction that it was formed by local citizens independently of any affiliation with a pre-existing unit of British “regulars.”³²

The young Englishman Nicholas Cresswell, just having arrived in Alexandria from England to make his fortune in America, provided an eyewitness report of the dramatic unfolding events –

[The entire town seemed to be] in utmost confusion; public discourse seemed to be focused entirely on the blockade of Boston’s harbor and the possibility of war with the mother country ... the seeds of rebellion are already sown and have taken very deep root [here] ... [the local Committee of Safety is inspecting] into the character and conduct of every tradesmen, to prevent them selling tea or buying British manufactures. Some of them [i.e., those persons found in violation] have been tarred and feathered, others had their property burnt and destroyed by the populace ... [The town’s militia of volunteers] make a formidable appearance, while practicing drills with officers, including George Washington in command, dressed in blue and buff uniforms, and soldiers in red and blue ones.

[I] went to a Presbyterian meeting [worship service]. These are a set of rebellious scoundrels, nothing but political discourses instead of Religious Lectures ... went to church [on another occasion] but won’t go any more to hear Political Sermons ... [the local Presbyterian preachers] are mere retailers of politics, sowers of sedition and rebellion, [who] serve to blow the coals of discord and excite the people to arms ... the Presbyterian clergy are particularly active in supporting the measures of Congress from the Rostrum, gaining proselytes, persecuting the unbelievers, preaching up the righteousness of their cause and persuading the unthinking populace of the infallibility of success. Some of these religious rascals assert that the Lord will send his angels to assist the injured Americans. They gain great numbers of converts and I am convinced [that] if they [i.e., the colonists] establish their

³² Congregation member William Ramsay was selected as the unit’s commanding officer at its formation on 21 September 1774. Congregation member James Hendricks would replace him when the unit was reorganized in response to the plan established by the Second Convention on 25 March 1775 (Schenck undated). Units were formed, but the rallying cry to fight for independence did not always meet with a rousing response of volunteers. By March 1775, the ranks of the Gentlemen and Mechanics Independent Company had been filled with 150 men, a reasonable number to form a company, but this number accounted for only about fifteen percent of the able-bodied men of Fairfax County and Alexandria (McDonnell 2007). Each household in Fairfax County was taxed three shillings per tithable member to purchase munitions (White 1978).

Earlier in 1774, militia forces from elsewhere in the Virginia were organized by the colony’s governor to fight in what came to be known as “Lord Dunmore’s War.” Between May and October 1774, forces led by Royal Governor Dunmore drove Native Americans across the Ohio River in the upper reaches of the Ohio river valley and out of the colony. Charles Simms is the sole Alexandrian believed to have engaged in this conflict (Thwaites and Kellogg 1905).

Independence that Presbyt[erians] will be the established religion on this Continent.³³
(Cresswell 1924)

The sermons that Cresswell found inappropriate are believed to have been delivered by the Rev. Amos Thompson, who frequently supplied the Meeting House pulpit following the death of the Rev. William Thom.³⁴ The sermons that Cresswell heard do not survive. From what is known about Rev. Thompson, his discourses would have embodied many of the same sentiments that were expressed by the Rev. William Gordon in a thanksgiving sermon that he delivered at Roxbury, Massachusetts, in November 1774 (Noll 2016). Rev. Gordon declared, in part –

³³ George Mason, and the Scottish physician Dr. John F. D. Smyth of Charles County, Maryland, witnessed the tarring and feathering event while in town to dine (Klingenmaier 2015).

Local militia units practiced drills and maneuvers on the town commons, the large open space to the northwest of Alexandria encompassing the contemporary Parker-Gray neighborhood (Old Bachelor 1861-62). The area was also utilized by comte de Rochambeau's French forces for an encampment when traveling to and from Yorktown in 1781 and 1782, and as a training ground by local militia preparing to engage in the War of 1812 (Rice and Brown 1972, w3r-us.org). Its more usual function was to provide grass for grazing cows (*The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* 13 March 1798). The terms "muster ground" and "catalpa lot" were also used to refer to the same locale.

Alexandria's Presbyterians were not viewed in a very favorable light by Cresswell, a strong loyalist. Elsewhere in his diary he commended – "In short, everything [here] is ripe for rebellion. The New Englanders by their canting, whining, [and] insinuating tricks have persuaded the rest of the Colonies that the Government [British Parliament] is going to make absolute slaves of them. This I believe never was intended, but the Presbyterian rascals have had address sufficient to make the other Colonies come to their scheme ... As the Rascally Presbyterian Clergy have all along been the chief instigators and supporters of this unnatural rebellion, they commonly honour the loyalists with the title of Tory, atheist, Deist or the most opprobrious name that the most inveterate malice can invent, sided by the cursed enthusiastic, uncharitable, bloody-minded and cruel persecuting spirit which in general constitutes a considerable part of the character of these *fanatic* brawlers, or rather *bellows* of sedition and rebellion" (Cresswell 1924, Bynum 1996). Others with loyalist tendencies, particularly those residing in the Middle Atlantic colonies where large numbers of Presbyterians resided, responded far more harshly to the actions of local Presbyterians (Tiedemann 2005).

Cresswell was incapable of reconciling the incoherence of the period – elsewhere he referred to Americans as the "most hospitable people on Earth" and as good-natured, agreeable, entrepreneurial, etc. (Curtis and Gill 2000). The deliverance of "political discourses" occurred not only during worship services conducted by Presbyterians; they were standard fare in Virginia's Church of England congregations as well, where sermons not only addressed "political subjects," but the pulpit was also where official pronouncements from the governor, council, and house of burgesses were issued (Fithian 1943 1900, Fea 2008a).

A Church of England parish had yet to be established in Alexandria – area residents were served by a chapel of ease, part of Truro Parish. Clergy at the three nearest places of worship of the Church of England – the Rev. Townshend Dade at Truro (Pohick Church), the Rev. Lee Massey at Fairfax (Falls Church), and the Rev. Jonathan Boucher at Annapolis – were all loyalists (Thomas 1907, Boucher 1925).

³⁴ Rev. Amos Thompson (1731-1804), born in Connecticut and a graduate of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), was minister of two Presbyterian congregations in Loudoun County – Kittocktin (later Catoctin), near Waterford, and Gum Spring, at today's Arcola. He supplied the congregation following the death of the Rev. William Thom. He was commissioned as a chaplain in the Maryland and Virginia Rifle Regiment of the Continental Line (Graham 1904, McLachlan 1976-91). He would enter Nicholas Cresswell's life again after Cresswell had been identified as a loyalist who was to be "convinced of his political errors" by Alexandria's Committee of Safety in 1775. In his efforts to escape imprisonment, Cresswell fled to New York City (occupied by British forces) in September, to either join the British Army or return to England. Rev. Thompson happened to be serving there and identified him. Cresswell was then forced to return to Leesburg, Virginia, for trial. Thomson Mason of Fairfax County interceded on Cresswell's behalf, which enabled him to gain his freedom and return to England (Cresswell 1924).

The pulpit is devoted, in general, to more important purposes than the fate of kingdoms [and] to the civil rights of human natures, being intended to recover men from the slavery of sin and Satan, to point out their escape from future misery through faith in the crucified Jesus, and to assist them in their preparations for an eternal blessedness. But still there are special times and seasons when it may treat politics. And, surely, if it is allowable for some who occupy it, by preaching the doctrines of non-resistance and passive obedience, to vilify the principles and to sap the foundations of that glorious revolution that exalted the House of Hanover to the British throne, it ought to be no transgression to others, nor to be construed into a want of loyalty, to speak consistently with those approved tenets that have made George the Third the first of European sovereigns, who otherwise, with all his personal virtues, might have lived an obscure Elector ... I shall now dedicate [this discourse] to the service of the public, [as] the situation of affairs is both distressing and alarming. The capital of the colony [Boston] is barbarously treated, pretendedly for a crime [Boston Tea Party], but actually for the noble stand she has made in favor of liberty against the partisans of slavery [etc.]. (Gordon 1775)

On Tuesday, the 1st of November, just two weeks after the Continental Congress issued its *Declaration and Resolves*, which provided a unified statement responding to what were perceived to be – “arbitrary proceedings of parliament and administration ... [and to taking actions] to obtain such establishment as their religion, laws, and liberties may not be subverted.” When the document received a public reading at a local Alexandria tavern, Nicholas Cresswell, who attended the reading, responded with dismay to the gathered crowds’ resounding support for the resolves – “I am sorry to see them so well received by the people and the sentiments so universally adopted. It is plain proof that the seeds of rebellion are already sown and have taken very deep root.” The next day “an effigy of Lord North [Frederick North, British Prime Minister during the revolutionary period] was shot at, then carried in great parade [about] the town and burnt” (Cresswell 1924).

Later that month, some Alexandrians demonstrated the state of their rebelliousness with a public protest over a Norfolk newspaper’s responses to the proclamation issued by the Continental Congress (Norfolk was a loyalist stronghold). In an open letter addressed to the publisher of Norfolk’s *Virginia Gazette; or, Norfolk Intelligencer*, but published in Williamsburg’s *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon) on 10 November, Alexandrians complained that the Norfolk paper’s coverage was –

calculated to divide and weaken the Friends of American Freedom [and] have become highly obnoxious to us [and that your account] attempting to ridicule that august body [i.e., the Continental Congress] is particularly offensive; and lest a continuation of our subscriptions be construed into a tacit approbation of your proceedings, we thus publicly desire that our names may be henceforth erased from the List of your Subscribers, being determined not to afford the smallest support to any person who is inimical to the interest of this country. We are ready to pay for your [i.e., our] subscription (one year) when demanded by yourself, or to your order.³⁵ (Cox 1971)

³⁵ Norfolk’s *Virginia Gazette; or, Norfolk Intelligencer*, published by William Duncan, a Scot, was the colony’s only newspaper printed outside the capital of Williamsburg during this period – Norfolk was the largest city in the colony with about 6,250 residents and was the largest coastal city in British Colonial America between New York and Charleston, South Carolina. Many of its merchants were Scots and the town remained a loyalist stronghold prior

At least ten of the protesting Alexandrians were congregation members – Robert Adam, Richard Arell, James Hendricks, Rev. James Muir, John Muir, William Ramsay, Dr. William Rumney, James Stewart, Charles Turner, and William Wilson (Ferrari 1992).³⁶

Events of 1775

While 1775 has come to be remembered as the year that the radical colonists in Massachusetts initiated direct shooting conflict with soldiers of the mother country, most locales were like Alexandria – they continued to be abuzz with preparations, but exactly for what no one really knew. On 19 April 1775, open conflict erupted with skirmishes between Massachusetts militia units and British Army regulars at Lexington, and then Concord, Massachusetts.³⁷ In May, the Presbyterian Church’s highest-level governing body convened in Philadelphia and responded to the emerging crisis with a long pastoral letter to be read to each congregation. It read, in part –

The Synod of New York and Philadelphia being met at a time when public affairs wear so threatening an aspect, and when (unless God in his sovereign providence speedily prevent it) all the horrors of a civil war throughout this great continent are to be apprehended, were of the opinion that they could not discharge their duties to the numerous congregations under their care without addressing them in this important crisis.

Affliction springeth not out of dust. He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men; and therefore, it becomes every person, family, city and province [colony] to humble themselves before the throne, to confess their sins by which they have provoked his indignation, and entreat him to pour out upon the ranks a spirit of repentance and prayer...

The Synod cannot help thinking that this is a proper time for pressing all of every rank, seriously to consider the things that belong to their eternal peace. Hostilities, long feared, have now taken place; the sword has been drawn in one province [i.e., the Province of Massachusetts Bay], and the whole continent, with hardly any exception, seem determined to defend their rights by force of arms. If at the same time, the British ministry shall continue to

to the revolution (Mitchell 1965, Hannum 2024). Alexandria’s first newspaper, *The Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser*, would not be issued until February 1784 – it was the fourth newspaper to be published in Virginia (Anderson 1959).

³⁶ In mid-December, when the loyalist Nicholas Creswell returned to Alexandria from visiting the Shenandoah Valley, he reported that – “nothing but committees and politics [occurring here], which puts everything in confusion ... I can hope that the differences between the Mother Country and the Colonies will be settled by Spring ... Christmas Day, but little regarded here ... This year ends with confusion, but am in hopes the ensuing one will put an end to the quarrel” (Cresswell 1924).

³⁷ A week prior to the fighting at Lexington and Concord, congregation member William Wilson described conditions in Alexandria in a letter to his family in Scotland – “It is very dull times here at present, the stores being mostly empty of coarse goods [utilitarian rather than “fancy” goods], which is what the planters really want, and what there is of them is all packed up till market time [market fairs, which were conducted twice yearly brought large numbers of people to town to shop and conduct business]. Everybody is waiting here with impatience till they hear what steps the Parliament is taking. If matters are not amicably settled betwixt Great Britain and this country soon, there will be very little business done here, especially if the people adhere so strictly to the [nonimportation] resolves of the Congress as they have done. The people of Virginia at their last Provincial Congress have put a stop to all Courts of Justice. [A month later he added that t]he people are very strict here since the late engagement. Every person that is above sixteen years of age is obliged to appear under arms twice every week or be deemed enemies to the country and treated accordingly” (Dobie 1896). Within a year, William Wilson would close his business and return to Scotland.

enforce their claims by violence, a lasting and bloody contest must be expected. Surely, then, it becomes those who have taken up arms, and profess a willingness to hazard their lives in the cause of liberty, to be prepared for death, which to many must be certain, and to every one is a possible or probable event.

We have long seen with concern the circumstances which occasioned, and the gradual increase of this unhappy difference. As ministers of the gospel of peace we have ardently wished that it could, and often hoped that it would, have been more easily accommodated. It is well known to you that we have not been instrumental in inflaming the minds of the people or urging them to acts of violence and disorder ... Suffer us, then, to lay hold of your present temper of mind, and to exhort, especially the young and vigorous, by assuring them that there is no soldier so undaunted as the pious man, no army so formidable as those who are superior to the fear of death ... Let, therefore, every one, who from generosity of spirit or benevolence of heart offers himself as a champion of his country's cause, be persuaded to reverence the name and walk in the fear of the Prince of the kings of the earth, and then he may, with the most unshaken firmness, expect the issue either in victory or death.

[W]e shall take the liberty to offer a few advices to the societies [congregations] under our charge, as to their public and general conduct ... first, let it ever appear that that you only desire the preservation and security of those rights which belong to you as FREEMEN and BRITONS. And that reconciliation upon these terms is your most ardent desire ... secondly, be careful to maintain the union which at present subsists through all the colonies ... thirdly, we do earnestly exhort and beseech the societies under our care to be strict and vigilant in their private government, and to watch over the morals of their several members ... fourthly, we cannot but recommend, and urge in the warmest manner, a regard to order and the public peace ... fifthly, we think it of importance to recommend to all of every rank, but especially to those who may be called to action, a spirit of humanity and mercy ... lastly, we would recommend to all the societies under our care not to content themselves with attending devoutly on general fasts, but to continue habitually in the exercise of prayer, and to have frequent occasional voluntary meetings for solemn intercession with God on the important trial.

We conclude with the most earnest prayer that the God of heaven may bless you in your temporal and spiritual concerns, and that the present unnatural dispute may be speedily terminated by an equitable and lasting settlement on constitutional principles.³⁸ (Presbyterian Church 1775)

In June, the second Continental Congress selected George Washington to serve as commander-in-chief of the still-being-formed Continental Army. In responding to the appointment, General Washington wrote from Philadelphia to the independent militia companies

³⁸ The Synod of New York and Philadelphia was the highest-level governing body of the Presbyterian Church prior to creation of the General Assembly in 1788 (Loetscher 1932, Gray 1995). The pastoral letter was drafted by the Rev. John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), who would soon become a delegate from New Jersey to the second Continental Congress, and six other commissioners to the meeting. The synod was meeting concurrently with the Continental Congress, which also issued a call for a Day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer throughout the colonies. The church deferred its call for a fast day to the one established by the Continental Congress on Thursday, 20 July 1775. That day became “in effect our first national holiday, [which] was probably one of the only moments of the Revolutionary War that Americans experienced simultaneously ... [as contemporary transportation facilities] made it nearly impossible for people across the country to share in Revolutionary events that weren’t planned in advance” (Carté 2021b).

of Fairfax County, which he had previously commanded – “I am called by the unanimous voice of the Colonies to the command of the Continental Army – an honour I did not aspire to; an honour I was solicitous to avoid, upon a full conviction of my inadequacy to the importance of the service.” The militia companies responded –

[We send our] most hearty congratulations upon your appointment to the supreme military command of the *American* confederated forces ... Firmly convinced, Sir, of your zealous attachment to the rights of your Country and those of mankind, and of your earnest desire that harmony and good will should again take place between us and our Parent State, we well know that your every exertion will be invariably employed to preserve the one and effect the other ... If at any time you shall judge it expedient for them [i.e., us] to join the troops at *Cambridge* [location of Washington’s headquarters during the siege of Boston], or to march elsewhere, they will cheerfully do it ... We now recommend you to the favour of Him by whom Kings reign and Princes decree justice; and wishing all your counsels and operations to be directed by his gracious providence to a happy and lasting union between us and *Great Britain*, we are with great regard, for [our]selves and the company, your Excellency’s most obedient and humble servants.³⁹ (Alexandrians 1775)

General Washington’s departure from Alexandria to take command of the Continental forces at Boston was much celebrated locally – “[Alexandrians were] on fire, either with rum, or patriotism, or both” according to the Rev. Jonathan Boucher (Zimmer 1996).⁴⁰ Soldiers from Alexandria would be engaged in the siege of Boston through the winter of 1775-76 (Mitchell 1975).

When Virginia’s General Assembly convened in July, one of its initial acts was passage of *An Ordinance for Raising and Embodying a Sufficient Force for the Defense and Protection of the Colony* (1775). Throughout Virginia, those willing to serve as “minutemen” coalesced into independent militia units organized by local political jurisdictions, representing either parishes or counties. In Northern Virginia, units formed in Fairfax (including Alexandria), Prince William, Fauquier, and Spotsylvania counties, taking names like the “Independent Company of Volunteers” or the “Gentlemen and Mechanics Independent Company.”

On 27 October 1775, King George III presented a formal response on behalf of Britain to the events unfolding in the American colonies in an address to Parliament –

Those who have long too successfully laboured to inflame my people in America by gross misrepresentations, and to infuse into their minds a system of opinions, repugnant to the true

³⁹ The exchanged letters were – Letter from General Washington to Officers of the Independent Companies of Fairfax, Etc. 29 June 1775 (Washington 1775) and Letter from James Hendricks, George Gilpin, and Robert H. Harrison to George Washington on behalf of the Independent Company of Fairfax 8 July 1775 (Alexandrians 1775).

⁴⁰ Rev. Jonathan Boucher (1738-1804), born in England and a vocal loyalist, was then serving as rector of St. Barnabas Church (Church of England) just across the Potomac River in Prince George’s County, Maryland, and happened to be in Alexandria on business. He had known Washington since the 1760s, and John Parke Custis had once been a student of his (Zimmer 1966). Later that summer, Rev. Boucher was again in Alexandria on business when a long-standing feud with Landon Carter (1710-1778) of Sabine Hall plantation in Richmond County, Virginia, was publicly renewed. By this time, Carter had become an ardent pamphleteer for independence from Britain. A mob gathered as loyalists sparred with patriots – Boucher later reported that the loudest patriot in the crowd other than Carter was a “virulent Presbyterian” – it was congregation member William Ramsay (Zimmer 1966, Boucher 1925).

constitution of the colonies, and to their subordinate relation to Great-Britain, now openly avow their revolt, hostility and rebellion. They have raised troops, and are collecting a naval force; they have seized the public revenue, and assumed to themselves legislative, executive, and judicial powers, which they already exercise in the most arbitrary manner, over the persons and property of their fellow-subjects ... The rebellious war now levied is become more general, and is manifestly carried on for the purpose of establishing an independent empire. I need not dwell upon the fatal effects of the success of such a plan ... It is now become the part of wisdom, and (in its effects) of clemency, to put a speedy end to these disorders by the most decisive exertions. For this purpose, I have increased my naval establishment, and greatly augmented my land forces ... When the unhappy and deluded multitude, against whom this force will be directed, shall become sensible of their error, I shall be ready to receive the misled with tenderness and mercy! (King George III 1775)

Alexandrians were being forced into a restless and continuously altering situation – their daily lives would remain in anxious flux for eight years.⁴¹ Some of the men of the Independent Blues were already headed to Boston, and locals would serve in the Virginia Regiments of the Continental Line when they came to be formed in 1776; others maintain service in “home guard” units throughout the conflict.⁴² Local Alexandria merchants began the process of securing war-related goods for Continental authorities; from now on, their ships would remain under continuous threat from the Royal Navy (Goldenberg 1981).

To John Harper goes the honor of making the earliest known procurement of goods directly related to establishing “preparedness” in Alexandria during these uncertain times – early in 1775, he purchased gunpowder, drums, and flags from merchants in Philadelphia for the militia units being formed locally.⁴³ Throughout this period, local merchants, many of whom were congregation members, engaged in commercial transactions for both the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Continental Congress. Such procurements were made to provision troops and to

⁴¹ Even such taken-for-granted institutions as the Royal Mail postal service were transformed by 1775. Mail service in British Colonia America had been conducted under contracts awarded by the crown since 1707. The second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia during 1775, created an independent postal service, in part to creating one that could deliver messages secure from interception by British officials (Harrison 1987, U.S. Postal Service 2006, Scheele 1970, Gallagher 2016).

A post office had been located in Alexandria from the town’s earliest days (Stuntz 1976-77). The postal service’s transition from British to Continental control appears to have occurred smoothly in Alexandria – William Ramsay held the post from 1770 to 1775, and James Hendricks took up the post in May 1775 – both were congregation members. Seven other congregation members would serve as local postmasters during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (U.S. Postal Service “Alexandria Post Office” online at usps.gov, accessed November 2011).

⁴² It remains unclear how many men from Northern Virginia’s militia units may have traveled to Massachusetts. Two Virginia units were organized explicitly to join Washington’s forces by the second Continental Congress in June 1775 – the Virginia Independent Rifle Company at Winchester, Virginia, commanded by Captain Daniel Morgan, and the Berkeley County Riflemen at Mecklenburg, Virginia (now Shepherdstown, West Virginia), commanded by Captain Hugh Stephenson (www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/841123/beeline-march-to-cambridge-national-guard-roots-of-armys-founding; accessed 28 November 2024).

⁴³ John Harper (1728-1804) was born in Philadelphia, where he was a merchant, ship’s captain, and a Quaker. He relocated to Alexandria about 1773 and became a wheat merchant, originally with William Hartshorne and later in business for himself on the waterfront at Harper’s Wharf. He also constructed a set of residences on Prince Street, and he and his family joined the Presbyterian congregation (Moore 1949, Wilson 1983).

A letter from George Mason to George Washington dated 17 February 1775 details the complexities of funding and procuring wartime necessities in a highly fragmented system of governance (founders.archives.gov).

provide items such as vessels and guns to defend the town and the Potomac River corridor.⁴⁴ Examples of explicit provisioning actions taken by congregation members in their roles as quartermaster/commissary officers, include –

Robert Adam responded to a request from George Washington that provisions, including 40,000 bushels of corn, 80 tons of hay, 40,000 gallons of rum, and various quantities of beef, salt, etc., be made available to the Continental and French armies entering Virginia by way of Alexandria in 1780.

John Carlyle received numerous warrants (purchase orders from the provisional government), usually in the amount of about £1,000, to provide meat and provisions.

John Dalton purchased 60 hogsheads of tobacco and 300 barrels of flour for a trading voyage to raise money; he was authorized to purchase 2,000 blankets produced in Pennsylvania for a Virginia militia unit; he received 2,900 bushels of one of the most valuable commodities in the colonies during the revolutionary period – salt – with instructions that “he safely to store the same;” and, together with George Mason, received £1,000, and then £760, to build row galleys and cutters, and to provide provisions and commodities for the Potomac River Department of the Virginia Navy.⁴⁵

James Hendricks as quartermaster/commissary officer at Alexandria, shipped “600 gallons of spirits and 1,000 barrels of flour” for the Yorktown Campaign at the request of George Washington (Risch 1981).

Daniel Roberdeau provided “spirits for the army” from his still on the Alexandria waterfront (Knepper and Prothro 1989).

Josiah Watson served as Deputy Assistant Quartermaster for supplying Continental Army soldiers (Waite 2012, Sprouse 1970-71, 1987, Gillette 2004, Roberts 2017). He also sold tickets to the United States Lottery, established by the Continental Congress to assist in financing the Continental Army in 1776.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ By September 1777, William Green Mumford, who served as deputy for the Southern District to Charles Stewart, Commissary General of Issues for the Continental Army, had appointed assistant commissary officers in Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Yorktown, and Portsmouth, Virginia. It was the first operational regional commissary system during the Revolutionary War. These formal procedures followed upon the system that had been established by local merchants during 1776 in response to a call for the delivery of ten thousand barrels of flour to the north (Risch 1981).

⁴⁵ John Dalton and George Mason were among the first merchants to become involved in direct trade with European countries once such was authorized by the Virginia Convention (Van Schreeven *et al.* 1973-83, Selby 1988). Dalton and Mason, in an important early demonstration of inter-colony cooperation, appealed to Maryland for assistance to co-defend the Potomac River in January 1776, when rumors circulated that Royal Navy ships had entered it. Mutual efforts between the two neighboring colonies continued throughout the revolutionary period.

William Ramsay contributed to the effort by joining with Marylanders in surveying and taking depth measurements of the river. Joint efforts also produced the Potomac Flotilla (also Potomac Fleet) of the Virginia Navy. By April 1776, preparation of a fleet of fourteen vessels, under the command of John Thomas Boucher of Maryland, was underway – it included the 110-ton sloop, *American Congress*, which mounted fourteen carriage guns and a complement of ninety-six seamen and marines (Cecere 2007, Middleton 1981, Goldenberg and Stoer 1981, Tilp 2006, Pulliam 2011a, O’Keefe 2020).

⁴⁶ Following the example of the mother country, lotteries were employed throughout the colonial and early national periods as the standard manner for fund raising for “public” projects. Lotteries were also turned to because Britain’s mercantile policies prohibited the creation of banks or the establishment of regular currency systems in her colonies (Spofford 1911, Ezell 1960).

Numerous women organized efforts to raise funds by selling tickets for the United States Lottery, which directly supported soldiers in the field. In Alexandria, Ann McCarty Ramsay (1730-1785), wife of William Ramsay (1716-

Abraham Faw provided cloth for uniforms, and constructed a powder magazine and a barracks to house prisoners from the battles at Saratoga and Yorktown.⁴⁷

In November 1775, Fairfax County's Committee of Correspondence petitioned directly to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia seeking formal authorization to trade directly with foreign ports that had been prohibited under Britain's rule, in order to replenish critically low stocks of salt in Northern Virginia. The petition read, in part –

[I]nformed of the present scarcity of salt in the colony [of Virginia] in general, and in this part of it in particular ... and apprehensive of the great distress and discontent that the want of this necessary article may occasion among the people, as well as the impossibility of providing proper provisions for the regiments of minute men and draughts from our militia which may be called into service next spring ... [we wish to] encourage the importation of salt either by permitting the exportation of country produce in return, in such manner as is allowed upon the importation of military stores, or in any other manner the Honorable Board shall judge best.⁴⁸ (Residents of Fairfax County 1775d)

The very next month the Continental Congress granted permission to merchants residing in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina to – “export produce from their respective colonies to any part of the world except Great Britain ... and in return to import so much salt from any part of the world not prohibited by the [Nonimportation] Association ... for the use of the inhabitants thereof” (Journal of the Second Continental Congress 29 December 1775).⁴⁹ It was a major step

1785), organized local fund-raising efforts during 1780, which included having clergy provide “sermons suited to the occasion” at public worship services. Northern Virginians donated \$75,518 (valued at more than one-million dollars in 2025), which included a \$20,000 donation from Martha Washington (Daughters of the American Revolution 1904, Thompson 2019b). Ramsay was singled out by Governor Thomas Jefferson as one of those Virginians who were leading the colony's efforts “in aid of the war” (Jefferson 1780). George Washington referred to women such as Ann McCarty Ramsay as “female patriots” (Holton 2021).

⁴⁷ Abraham Faw (originally Pfauw, 1747-1828) was born in Benken, Switzerland, and resided in Frederick Town (now Frederick), Maryland, during the war. While living in Frederick, he served on its Committee of Observation beginning in 1775; supported legislation to abolish slavery while serving in Maryland's House of Representatives, 1786-88; and signed the U.S. Constitution at Maryland's Ratification Convention in 1788 (Papenfuss 1979). He relocated to Alexandria after the war, joined the congregation, and served as a justice of the peace, Hustings Court justice, coroner, and alderman, among other public positions.

⁴⁸ Four members of the county's Committee of Correspondence who signed the petition – John Dalton, William Ramsay, John Carlyle, and John Muir – were congregation members; the other two were James Kirk and George Mason.

⁴⁹ The provision of basic staples during such unsettled times, which included a British blockade of the Atlantic Seaboard, was far from easy (Risch 1981, Goldenberg 1981). The important commodity of common salt, the importation of which had been explicitly constrained by Parliament into the 1760s, became particularly scarce (Harrison 1987). It had been supplied inexpensively as an import product from European and Caribbean ports, so production had not been developed in Virginia. Within the first year of open conflict, hoarding and shortages emerged throughout the colonies (Bowman 1971, Mason 1990, McDonnell and Holton 2000). In November 1775, Fairfax County's Committee of Correspondence wrote to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia seeking release from the general nonimportation laws noting the “present scarcity of salt in this Colony in general, and in this part of it in particular... [and] the impossibility of furnishing proper provisions for the regiments of minute-men and draughts [i.e., draftees] from our militia” (Alexandrians 1775a).

In November 1775, Englishman Nicholas Cresswell, then residing in Leesburg, Loudoun County, Virginia, noted several times that salt was in short supply there he wrote – “[there was a] disturbance for want of salt.” In October 1776, Cresswell wrote – “Salt sells here [Leesburg] at Forty shillings, [hard] currency, per Bushel. This article

by the rebellious colonies in breaking away from the long-established mercantile system, which had required residents in the colonies to confine the purchase of goods solely to the home country if they were produced there. It was the first time that Alexandria's merchants could legally engage in "free trade" – from the perspective of the British government in London, such activities, of course, were open privateering (Dolin 2022, Bartlinski 2008b).

Alexandria also served as a convenient place for holding prisoners as it was removed from areas of active conflict and possessed the substantial infrastructure requirements necessary to provide for the prisoners. As early as spring 1777, it housed prisoners of the Seventy-First Regiment of Foot (Fraser's Highlanders), captured at Boston and New York. Nicholas Cresswell provided an account of a drunken soldier of this regiment, who "enlisting into the Rebel service" then retracted his action once sober. He was disciplined by the ranking British officer, a sergeant, with a court martial that "condemned the poor wretch to receive 1,500 lashes with a switch upon his bare back, 100 every day till the number was complete" (arw.fandom.com/wiki, Cresswell 1924).

The last month of 1775 brought fears to Alexandrians that the nascent war's open hostilities were about to directly involve their fair town. By then, Royal Governor Dunmore was governing from a squadron of ships in Chesapeake Bay after having evacuated first Williamsburg, the colony's capital, and then Norfolk, the colony's largest town.⁵⁰ Dunmore's fleet, which included more than one hundred vessels – some from the Royal Navy, others requisitioned from Virginians – sailed around the Chesapeake Bay marauding and seeking to recruit runaway slaves (Horton 1999). His plan included sailing up the Potomac River, destroying plantations along the way – most importantly those of George Washington and George Mason – and then joining at Alexandria with a force of British and Native Americans being assembled by John Connolly (1741-1813) in the backcountries of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania (Holton 1999, Sterner 2020). If successful, this operation, which was undertaken with the approval of General Thomas

usually [i.e., previously] sold for four shillings. If no salt comes in there will be an insurrection in the Colony" (Cresswell 1924). In December 1776, he noted that people in Leesburg had become desperate for the substance, and that John Dalton was expected to receive a shipment in Alexandria later that month. On 4 December, Cresswell wrote that – "a Dutch [i.e., German] mob of about 40 horsemen went to the town to-day on their way to Alexandria to search for salt. If they find any, they will take it by force. All of them are armed with swords and large clubs. This article is exceedingly scarce; if none comes in the people will revolt. They cannot possibly subsist without a considerable quantity of this article [which is used primarily for salting meat to prevent spoilage]." Two days later, he wrote – "This day the Dutchmen returned from Alexandria without doing the least mischief; the poor wretches have got about three pints of salt per man. They are told that there will be plenty in a little time. But I hope his Majesty's Ships will prevent it [from] coming into the [Chesapeake] Bay" (Cresswell 1924).

Many farmers in Loudoun County rented their plantations from wealthy landowners and had pushed for an egalitarian structure to the organization of military units early in the conflict in the so-called "Loudoun riots." In response to this civil unrest, James Hendricks, then serving as an officer in Williamsburg, queried of Leven Powell in Loudoun County – "How goes the spirit of levelling? Is all quiet?" (Holton 1999, McDonnell and Holton 2000, McDonnell 2007). The march on Alexandria was not an isolated event – more than thirty food riots occurred throughout the colonies during 1776 and 1777 (Holton 2021).

⁵⁰ Dunmore fled from Norfolk's harbor with his flotilla following the Battle of Great Bridge on 9 December 1775. In retribution for this loss, the British fleet began a bombardment of Norfolk on New Years Day 1776 that lasted several days. Then, because of the strategic importance of Norfolk as a port town and loyalist stronghold, Virginia's Committee of Safety approved its total destruction, which was completed in February – only about 1,300 residents, about four percent of its original number of inhabitants, survived the British bombardment and subsequent fire set by loyalists (Hannum 2024). Fifteen years later, when the new nation's initial census of population was conducted by the federal government (1790), Norfolk's population stood at 3,000 residents, less than half its pre-war total of 6,250. Rev. Muir was twice commissioned by the church to rebuild Norfolk's Presbyterian congregation following the war (see account of his efforts in Appendix C).

Gage, commander-in-chief of British land forces in North America, would divide the American colonies into two separate geographic domains, which would be unable to support each other.

The command headquarters for the well-fortified line dividing the colonies was to be Alexandria. Imagine the sense of dread that impelled Fairfax County's Committee of Correspondence when writing to Virginia's Fourth Convention – "It appears, not only from the public Papers, but Lord Dunmore's Assignment with *Conoly* [John Connolly] that Alexandria was to be their place of rendezvous" (McDonnell 2007).

Fortunately for Alexandria and its residents, plans for John Connolly's western portion of the operation were discovered while he was near Hagerstown, Maryland – the land-based portion of the operation was completely foiled (Burton 1909). British ships that had entered the Potomac River engaged in raids from St. Mary's County, Maryland, as far north as Quantico, Virginia, about twenty-five miles south of Alexandria, before returning to the open waters of the bay (Schama 2005, Gutheim 1949, McDonnell 2007, Pulliam 2011a, Cecere 2007 2014, Rothbard 2011, Holton 2021, Parkinson 2025). At the time this operation was discovered, Alexandria was being defended by a battalion of Virginia militia forces headed by Colonel Hugh Mercer of Fredericksburg, Virginia.⁵¹ The town would remain vulnerable to naval attack throughout the war in spite of building and equipping its own Potomac River squadron of ships (Sprouse 1970-71, Pulliam 2011a).

As 1775 ended, the anxieties raised by this contemplated operation, which well could have resulted in Alexandria being at the very center of the nascent conflict, were expressed in a letter sent by the local Committee of Correspondence to their two delegates at the fourth Virginia Convention – George Mason and Charles Broadwater – then convened in Williamsburg. It read, in part –

When ministerial tools [i.e., Royal Governor Dunmore and British forces loyal to him] are employing every wicked machination to accomplish their unjust purposes, 'tis high time every virtuous citizen should be on the watch guarding those liberties, which the tyrants have mark'd out for destruction. Actuated by these motives and wishing to contribute to the protection of this colony & the common cause, we the Committee of Correspondence of the County of Fairfax beg leave to present you our representatives in Genl. Convention with a few such observations as we think may be useful at this period of imminent danger ...

[Thereafter follows a long account of the perceived needs of Northern Virginians to effectively defend itself and this portion of Virginia against] Lord Dunmore's Pirates [and asks] why this part of the country [i.e., Virginia] to be left unguarded? When it appears, not only from public papers, but Lord Dunmore's assignment with *Conoly* [John Connolly] that Alexandria was to be their place of rendezvous in the month of April next, a place well-known to the officers who were out on Gen. [Edward] Braddock's Expedition, a safe harbor for ships of war & commanding a most material part of the Colony ...

⁵¹ Hugh Mercer (1726-1777) was born in Scotland, where his father, the Rev. William Mercer, was minister of the Church of Scotland congregation at Pitsligo in Aberdeenshire. He trained for medicine at the University of Aberdeen and served as a surgeon in the British Army prior to relocating to the Colony of Pennsylvania in 1746. Following service with Pennsylvania's provincial militia during the French and Indian War, where he met George Washington, he relocated to Fredericksburg, where he established a medical practice and apothecary, whose customers included members of the Washington family. Excluded from a position in the militia units being formed by the Virginia Convention in 1775 because he was a "northern Briton" (i.e., a Scot), he was elected commander of the local militia unit formed in the counties surrounding Fredericksburg. He was mortally wounded at the Battle of Princeton and died while in the care of Dr. Benjamin Rush and local Quaker volunteers on 12 January 1777 (Cecere 2015).

[It concludes with the sentiment that the Convention] use your utmost endeavours that men may be raised on the regular establishment & and vessels arm'd both to be stationed at such places as will contribute to the safety of the colony at large [and] that you be not sparing in the raising of money for the good of the Colony, but be cautious in the distribution of it, for be the taxes in the future what they may, we shall cheerfully retrench every other luxury to secure that of being free.⁵² (Residents of Fairfax 1775c)

Events of 1776-79

During the Revolutionary War's initial years, major events played out far from Alexandria (Wood 1969, McCullough 2005, Taylor 2014).⁵³ In January 1776, Thomas Paine, working in Philadelphia, issued his *Common Sense* with its revolutionary call –

O! Ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe ... We have it in our power to begin the world over again ... The birthday of a new world is at hand. (Paine 1776)

Paine's forty-seven-page pamphlet was reprinted in newspapers, widely read publicly in coffee houses and taverns, and sold 120,000 copies in three months (Clark 2018, Rothbard 2011, Gilbert 2016).⁵⁴

In March 1776, the second Continental Congress, convened in Philadelphia, provided a sense of the times when it produced a broadside to be distributed to individual religious congregations calling for –

a day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer [in response to] times of impending calamity and distress [and in particular, to] the warlike preparations of the British Ministry to subvert our invaluable rights and privileges, and to reduce us by fire and sword, by the savages of the

⁵² Seven members of the committee signed the letter, with John Carlyle, John Dalton, William Ramsay, and John Muir being members of the congregation, and the others being Richard Conway, George Gilpin, and James Kirk (Residents of Fairfax 1775c).

⁵³ Alexandrians continued to be wary of the fleet still controlled by Virginia's deposed Royal Governor Dunmore during 1776. Writing to the Annapolis Committee of Safety to seek support for the joint defense of the Potomac River in July 1776, locals noted – "We have been frequently alarmed with *Dunmore* and his banditti, with the vessels of war paying us a visit; and when he lately made his appearance in our river, it was presumed his intention was to make this place an object of his attention ... Should you be attacked, and our assistance necessary, we would cheerfully obey the summons of liberty, humanity, and neighbourly affection, and fly to your assistance; we should be wanting in duty if we did not, because we are not bound up by any ordinance, nor command, but are at full liberty to exert ourselves in behalf of ourselves and in that of a sister Colony [an activity that had been prohibited during the colonial period]" (Alexandrians 1776, Miller 1981).

⁵⁴ Coffee houses, which had been established in British Colonial America's urban centers, continued to function as important social gathering spots into the nineteenth century. Catering to middle and upper class residents and Typically serving coffee and chocolate drinks, which were not available in homes, rather than alcohol, an early nineteenth-century Alexandria coffee house located on lower Prince Street just west of Union Street, described itself as – "a resort at once genteel and respectable ... a suitable place for the reception of gentlemen from whom alone he solicits patronage, the decorations, papering, and painting displays at one view elegance and taste combined ... [It is] supplied with most commercial papers of the Union together with every refreshment suitable to the season" (*Alexandria Gazette and Daily Advertiser* 2 March 1822).

wilderness [i.e., Native Americans] and our own domestics [i.e., enslaved African Americans], to the most abject and ignominious bondage. (U.S. Continental Congress 1776)

Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D., president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), in Princeton, New Jersey, who was then serving as a delegate to the Continental Congress from New Jersey, responded to the call from Congress by conducting a service at Princeton's Presbyterian Meeting House (now Nassau Presbyterian Church). The sermon he delivered, *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men*, on the designated day of humiliation, fasting, and prayer, 17 May 1776, was dedicated to the President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock, in its published form, and was widely reprinted on both sides of the Atlantic (Witherspoon 1776, Tait 1983, Hart 2010, Fortson 2017, Mailer 2017).⁵⁵ The sermon itself presented a politicized cleric, who addressed this transformation –

You are all my witnesses that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season, however, it is not only lawful but necessary; and I willingly embrace the opportunity of my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in arms is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature. So far as we have hitherto proceeded, I am satisfied that the confederacy of the colonies has not been the effect of pride, resentment, or sedition, but of a deep and general conviction that our civil and religious liberties, and consequently in a great measure the temporal and *eternal* happiness of us and our posterity, depended on the issue.

The truth, then, asserted in this text, which I propose to illustrate and prove is – *that all the disorderly passions of men, whether exposing the innocent to private injury, or whether they are the arrows of divine judgement in public calamity, shall in the end, be to the praise of God*; Or, to apply it more particularly to the present state of American Colonies, and the plague of war – *The ambition of mistaken princes, the cunning and cruelty of oppressive and corrupt ministers, and even the inhumanity of brutal soldiers, however dreadful, shall finally promote the glory of God, and in the meantime, while the storm continues, his mercy and kindness shall appear in prescribing bounds to their rage and fury.*

In discoursing on this subject, it is my intention, through the assistance of divine grace – To point out to you in some particulars how the wrath of Man praises God [and] to apply these principles to our present situation, by inferences of truth for your instruction and comfort, and by suitable exhortations to duty in the present crisis. (Witherspoon 1776)

⁵⁵ Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D. (1723-1794) introduced the Scottish enlightenment's commonsense realist philosophy to British Colonial America while serving as president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University) from 1768 to 1794 (Ahlstrom 1955, Sloan 1971, Durbin 2018, DeYoung 2020). He was the only cleric to sign the *Declaration of Independence* in July 1776 (Nichols 1964, Noll 1989, Noll 1999-2002b, Lambert 2003, Morrison 2005, Fea 2011, Yoo 2022, Wilentz 2024, Wirzbicki 2024).

Rev. Witherspoon was known to Rev. Muir from when they both resided in Paisley, Scotland – Rev. Witherspoon served the Laigh Kirk congregation at the same time as Rev. Muir's father, the Rev. George Muir, served the High Kirk. When Rev. Witherspoon delivered this sermon, Rev. Muir was completing his final year of studies for an M.A. degree at the University of Glasgow. Rev. Isaac Stockton Keith, who would serve the congregation beginning in 1780, was completing his final year of study at the College of New Jersey (Princeton University) so might well have heard the sermon delivered. The response to America's fight for political independence in Scotland was quite mixed – Scotland's economy and political establishment were still experiencing major adjustments following political union with England in 1707 (Fagerstrom 1954).

In its published form, Rev. Witherspoon's sermon expanded his argument for participating in the fight for independence from Britain, which he addressed explicitly "to the Natives of Scotland residing in America." There, he pointed out that –

[S]ince coming to America at an advanced period of life, the friendship of my countrymen has been as much above my expectations as dessert. I hope every reader will consider what is now offered is the effect not only of unfeigned good-will but of the most ardent affection ... It has been often said that the present is likely to be an important æra to America. I think we may say much more – it is likely to be an important æra in the history of mankind.

In America we see a rich and valuable soil, and an extensive country taken possession of by the power, the learning, and the wealth of Europe. For this reason it is now exhibiting to the world a scene which was never seen before. It has had a progress in improvement and population so rapid as no political calculators have been able to ascertain ... It is proper to observe that the British settlements have been improved in a proportion far beyond the settlements of other European nations. To what can this be ascribed? Not for the climate; for they are of all climates. Not to the people; for they are a mixture of all nations. It must therefore be resolved singly into the degree of British liberty which they brought from home. When this is the undeniable state of things, can any person of liberal mind wish that these great and growing countries [i.e., British Colonial America] should be brought back to a state of subjugation to a distant power? A state of independency will be both honorable and profitable to this country ... We shall have the opportunity of forming plans of government upon the most rational, just, and equal principles. I confess I have always looked upon this kind of enthusiastic satisfaction. The case never happened before since the world began.

I am confident the independence of America will, in the end be to the real advantage of the Island of Great-Britain ... Why should the security or prosperity of this vast country be sacrificed to the supposed interest of an inconsiderable spot [on Earth]? I cannot believe that the misery and subjection of any country on earth is necessary to the happiness of another ... The success and increase of one nation is, or may be, a benefit to every other. It is seldom, indeed, that a people in general can receive and adopt these generous sentiments; they are nonetheless perfectly just. It is industry only, and not possessions, that makes the strength and wealth of a nation; and this is not hindered, but encouraged, provoked, and rewarded by the industry of others ... If the trade of America has hitherto been of so great benefit to England, how much more valuable may it be when these countries [British Colonial America] shall be still more improved.

I hope you will take in good part the above reflections, which I think contain nothing that is virulent or indecent against any man or body of men. They are the effects of judgement and conviction. The author ... hopes that an honest and faithful support of liberty and equal government in this part of the world will be no just reproach to his character, either as a scholar, a minister, or a christian [*sic*], and that it is perfectly consistent with an undiminished regard for the country which gave him birth.⁵⁶ (Witherspoon 1776)

⁵⁶ Although it had been building for some time, a radical transformation of attitudes in British Colonial America toward the crown and parliament would occur during the decade following parliament's issuance of the *Declaratory Act* with its statement that parliament had sovereignty over colonists "in all cases whatsoever" (Acts of Parliament 1766). To Reformed Protestant colonists, honoring this assertion by parliament "would be tantamount to forsaking God and abdicating their national covenant pledge to 'have no other gods' before them" (Stout 1996) Following what came to be termed Protestant Resistance Theory, which holds that tyrants can be actively resisted, the only question that needs answering is who could do so and under what circumstances. Many Protestant colonists came to

The fifth Virginia Convention, meeting in Williamsburg from 6 May to 5 July, took four major steps toward establishing independence from Britain – it wrote a constitution for an independent commonwealth; it formally adopted a *Declaration of Rights*, initially prepared by George Mason, delegate from Northern Virginia, on 12 June, which laid out a set of principles for a republican form of government; it elected Patrick Henry to become the first governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia; and it elected delegates to the Continental Congress and called on them to vote for independence from Britain.⁵⁷

On 4 July 1776, the second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, voted unanimously to declare that Britain's thirteen colonies along the Atlantic Seaboard were no longer part of the British Empire. The *Declaration of Independence* would be printed and read publicly in Philadelphia over the next few days.⁵⁸ Alexandrians immediately joined with militiamen from both Virginia and Maryland to maintain protective vigilance over the upper portions of the tidal Potomac – special attention was devoted to Mount Vernon, where Martha Washington continued to reside.

Alexandria also provided the critical support function of serving as an assembly station for regimental recruits from Virginia and the Carolinas heading north to join the Continental Army.

the conclusion that they were prepared to fight to establish – “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21.1) – in which freedom and liberty would exist for individuals in both religious and political terms (VanDrunen 20005-06, Smith and Hall 2017-18, Pearl 2017).

This radical transition in sentiment is demonstrated by comparing the words that Rev. Witherspoon used in his 1776 sermon with those made by the Presbyterian Church in 1766 (Presbyterian Church 1766) with ones made by the Rev. Samuel Davies, also delivered as president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University) in 1761 that sing the praises of King George II – “George, the Mighty, the Father of Britain and her Colonies, the Guardian of Laws and Liberty, the Protector of the Oppressed, the Arbiter of Europe, the Terror of Tyrants and France; George, the Friend of Man, the Benefactor of Millions, is no More! This remote American Continent shares in the loyal Sympathy ... What a vigilant fatherly Care did he extend to the Infant Colonies of Britain, exposed in this savage Wilderness? Hence the Safety our once defenceless Frontier now enjoys. Hence the reduction of that mongrel Race of French and Indian Savages who would have been the Eternal Enemies of Humanity, Peace, Religion and Britons ... Can the British Annals in the Compass of seventeen Hundred Years produce a Period more favourable to Liberty, Peace, Prosperity, Commerce and Religion? ... As good Subjects, whatever our present or future Stations may be in Society, or in whatever Territory of His Majesty's Dominions we may act our Part on the Stage of Life; let the Principles of Loyalty and Liberty, let cheerful Obedience to our King, and a disinterested Love to our Country, let the generous virtues Public Spirit inspire our Hearts and appear in all our Conduct ... The Christian cannot but be a Patriot [i.e., a defender of their country, not a rebel]. The Christian cannot but be a good Subject” (Davies 1761).

⁵⁷ The document's sixteenth and final article of the *Declaration of Rights* addressed religion. George Mason's original proposal “that men should enjoy the fullest toleration in the exercise of religion” was amended in committee, based on a proposal from James Madison, to read in its final version – “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards one another” (gunstonhall.org, billofrightsinstitute.org).

⁵⁸ The date when the *Declaration of Independence* was initially read in Alexandria is not known. It was probably within about a week of its issuance, as the entire document was printed in the Annapolis newspaper on 11 July (*Maryland Gazette* 11 July 1776) and in Williamsburg on 20 July, where it – “was proclaimed ... and received with universal applause, under a discharge of cannon, firing of small arms, illuminations in the evening, &c., &c.” (*Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) 27 July 1776). Royal Governor Dunmore had fled from Williamsburg the previous year. When Alexandria's Washington Society was formed in 1800 to honor George Washington and to raise funds for the Alexandria Academy, it would host an annual public reading of the *Declaration of Independence* on the Fourth of July at the town hall/market area into the middle of the nineteenth century.

Beginning in February 1777, it also joined with nearby Colchester, Dumfries, and Georgetown to serve as a processing center to examine the medical health of, and to administer smallpox inoculations to, soldiers moving from the southern colonies to join Washington's Continental Army operating in the northern and Middle Atlantic colonies.⁵⁹ During April 1777, about six hundred local residents were inoculated as well. As many as two thousand soldiers were inoculated during this period (Hazard 1777-78, U.S. Continental Congress 1823, Hirschfeld 1991, Fenn 2001, Major 2002, Gillett 2004, Weir 2014, O'Keefe 2020, Holton 2021).⁶⁰

Events of 1780-82

The congregation entered a new era of its own in 1780 – in October of that year, the Rev. Isaac Stockton Keith arrived from Pennsylvania to take up his duties as the congregation's second installed minister. Within months of his arrival, aspects of the war's hostilities presented themselves directly to Alexandrians. During spring 1781, British warships in the Chesapeake Bay re-positioned themselves between Annapolis and Baltimore, Maryland, and several British ships, crewed by loyalists, plundered plantations along the Potomac River. The operation was conducted in conjunction with what was believed to be a larger strategic maneuver to capture Baltimore with the southern British Army commanded by General Charles Cornwallis.⁶¹ Colonel Robert Townshend Hooe, commander of Maryland's Twelfth Battalion, warned Maryland's Governor Thomas Sims Lee from Alexandria that it was –

“generally believed that [General] Cornwallis was to march through Virginia to Baltimore, where a fleet and part of the British Army, it is supposed, will meet him ... We are in a miserable situation for want of arms.” (Tinder 2000)

In April, while forces led by the Marquis de Lafayette rested in Alexandria, he reported to Governor Lee that “I do not see how it [i.e., an attack by Cornwallis's army moving north] is to

⁵⁹ The effectiveness of inoculating individuals to prevent the spread of smallpox was known in British Colonial America as early as 1716 but came to be an illegal procedure throughout the colonies by proclamation of the Continental Congress in 1776. After Dr. James Craik had successfully inoculated the enslaved persons at Mount Vernon and a smallpox outbreak disrupted an election in Alexandria, both occurring during May 1777, George Washington convinced Governor Patrick Henry and the Continental Congress to permit inoculations. This led to the first mass inoculation of an army while it was engaged in active conflict (Minardi 2004, Gillett 2004, Fenn 2001, Weir 2014). It is estimated that more than 100,000 persons died in British Colonial America from the smallpox epidemic that began during 1775 (Fenn 2014, Wehrman 2022). Epidemics remained a part of life in Alexandria to the middle of the nineteenth century.

⁶⁰ The location of the inoculation center remains unknown – it would have been outside the built-up area. Breastworks, i.e., trenches and earthworks raised to breast height to protect defenders firing over their tops, were erected to defend it (McAllister 2009). It functioned under the command of Dr. William Rickman (1731-1783), Physician and Director General for Hospitals in Virginia. At one point, operations of the center were brought into question by the Continental Congress due to seemingly high mortality rates. Contributors to the congressional investigation included congregation members, Colonel James Hendricks, commanding officer of the First Virginia Regiment, and Josiah Watson, Deputy Assistant Quarter Master (Quartermaster). Both testified that management of the center was not responsible for the high mortality rates, but of other factors such as the troops begin exhausted from marching long distances, some were from North Carolina, and the lack of materials to mitigate against the effects of harsh winter weather. The review committee's argument carried the day – Dr. Rickman was exonerated of any wrongdoing (Duncan 1931, Gillett 2004).

⁶¹ During 1781, British warships conducted raids throughout the Chesapeake Bay destroying farmsteads, shipyards, and towns, plundering foodstuffs, and burning crops (Williamson 2007, Tinder 2000 2008).

be prevented” (Tinder 2000).⁶² In May, raiders from Cornwallis’ army got as close to Alexandria as Fredericksburg, forty miles to the south, before his army’s situation changed dramatically.⁶³

In conjunction with these maneuvers, British raiding ships entered the Potomac River in March. Properties were destroyed starting in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, and by April, the raiding parties had reached Mount Vernon, where a keel boat was taken and seventeen enslaved persons. One of the raiding party’s objectives was to form a blockade and capture goods from vessels originating from, or heading to, the port of Alexandria, and eventually, if possible, to destroy the town. Fortunately for Alexandria, the main British flotilla, composed of three major ships, ran aground about ten miles south of Alexandria near Piscataway, Maryland. On a night raid in July, however, a small British ship, the *Trimmer*, sailed north to Alexandria’s harbor with the objective of seizing fully loaded ships. The raid was foiled by local militia – the *Trimmer* and its goods were captured, and the perpetrators were captured and imprisoned. This episode brought Alexandria’s direct engagement in wartime conflict to a conclusion (Cox 1971, Shomette 2003, Tilp 2006).⁶⁴

In late summer 1781, comte de Rochambeau and his army of 5,500 French soldiers encamped at Alexandria on their way to join General Washington’s Continental Army, then engaging a British force of 8,300 soldiers led by General Cornwallis. By September, General Washington, commanding a total of 8,000 Continentals, 9,000 French troops, and 3,000 Virginia militiamen, was able to lay siege to Cornwallis’ British forces encamped at Yorktown, Virginia.⁶⁵ On 19 October 1781, Cornwallis surrendered his army – the last major military

⁶² Robert Townshend Hooe (1743-1809), a Roman Catholic from Charles County, relocated to Alexandria during the war and served as mayor in 1780.

Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), who was then leading a force of 1,200 light infantrymen, had been in Virginia in March 1781 but by April was in the process of returning to the north. Receiving direct instructions from General Washington while his unit was at Elkton, Maryland, at the head of the Chesapeake Bay, he reversed course to join Washington’s campaign in Virginia, embarking on a forced march that would last seventeen days. The unit rested in Alexandria on 21-23 April, then marched to Richmond, where it assisted in forcing Major-General William Phillips and British forces to withdraw to the Jamestown area (McGroarty 1947, George Washington Papers, May 1781, at founders.archives.gov; accessed 7 January 2021).

Upon arriving in Virginia, Lafayette wrote Governor Thomas Jefferson – “On my arrival at Alexandria ... I found not one single waggon [of supplies] could be obtained ... [we desperately require] baked bread, fresh and salt meat, with a quantity of rum will being necessary. We are entirely destitute of shoes that unless a large number of them are collected, the feet of our men will be so sore as to make it impossible for them to advance” (Letter from Lafayette to Jefferson 21 April 1781 at founders.archives.gov).

⁶³ On 10 August, Lafayette was able to report to Maryland’s governor that “Instead of proceeding up the [Chesapeake] bay, the fleet stood into York River. The troops have landed ... York town is made a place of arms. Lord Cornwallis is present and has with him his whole force except the garrison of Poarsmouth [Portsmouth, Virginia]” (Tinder 2000, Risch 1981, Holton 2021).

⁶⁴ James Hendricks, then serving as mayor of Alexandria, sought the assistance of Governor Thomas Jefferson to strengthen the defenses of Alexandria (Worsley 1993/94, Jefferson 1781). Peter Wagener (1741-1798), clerk of Alexandria’s Hustings Court, solicited assistance from the Colony of Maryland over the same issue (Wagener 1781). Congregation members Colin McIver, William McKnight, John Short, Andrew Wales, and William Ward were among the local militia members who foiled the British raid (Cox 1971).

Alexandria was fortunate not to come under direct attack, nor to be occupied by British forces, as occurred with the major coastal cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston – among other deprivations that occurred in these occupied cities was damage to places of worship, including Presbyterian structures (Breed 1876 Unknown 1909a). Alexandria’s commercial trade activities actually increased, and its port facilities were expanded during the revolutionary period (Stoessel 1969).

⁶⁵ Some Alexandrians supported the Yorktown Campaign by constructing roads to facilitate troop movement. In Alexandria, Colonel James Hendricks worked to address a persistent problem of the Continental armies throughout the conflict – the provision of wheat flour. At one point during this period, he implored James McAlister of Berkeley

engagement of the war for independence was over. French forces wintered in Virginia, and in July 1782, encamped once again at Alexandria on their march to Boston to return to France (Rice and Brown 1972). The years of conflict to gain independence were over. During the following year, those still serving on active military duty returned home.

Events of 1783 and Thereafter

In April 1783, a general cessation of open hostilities on land and sea was established for all British and American forces. On 3 September 1783, diplomatic efforts brought hostilities to a conclusion with ratification of the Treaty of Paris. In conjunction with the formal declaration of peace, the Presbyterian Church prepared a pastoral letter to be read to congregations. Surviving records do not indicate if Rev. Keith read it from the pulpit at a regular worship service, or perhaps before a public service, but we can believe with some assurance that he presented it – he had been a delegate to the church assembly at Philadelphia in May when the letter was crafted, and Alexandrians would have welcomed an opportunity to hear any thoughtful considerations of the period's events that might assist them to move beyond the years of wartime anxiety.⁶⁶ The letter read, in part –

Now that conflict is over, and we have the best reason to suppose (the preliminaries being signed and ratified) that a happy and honourable peace will be speedily settled by a definitive treaty ... We cannot help congratulating you on the general and almost universal attachment of the Presbyterian body to the cause of liberty and the rights of mankind. This has been visible in their conduct and has been confessed by the complaints and resentment of the common enemy. Such a circumstance ought not only to afford us satisfaction on the review, as bringing credit to the body [of Presbyterians] in general, but to increase our gratitude to God for the happy issue of the war; had it been unsuccessful, we must have drunk deeply of the cup of suffering. Our burnt and wasted churches, and our plundered dwellings, in such places as fell under the power of our adversaries, are but an earnest [i.e., examples] of what we must have suffered had they finally prevailed.

County, Virginia (West Virginia) – “For God’s sake, exert yourself and send down all the Flour you can, as our Army is in a starving condition – let the people know that this is in all probability the last time they will be call’d on in this manner – a few weeks exertions and the enemy is expelled [from] our state forever” (Cecere 2007). An unusually dry summer during 1781 brought the mills in Northern Virginia to a halt, so little wheat flour could be produced. By September, however, Hendricks was able to report – “I now have it in my power to send by water all the flour that is made in Fairfax, Loudoun, Berkeley, Frederick, Hampshire & Shenandoah [counties]” (Unknown 1987, Risch 1981).

⁶⁶ On the first Sunday of December 1783, three months after the signing of the peace agreement, the Rev. David Griffith (1742-1789), rector of the Church of England (Christ (Episcopal) Church), officiated at a community service of thanksgiving for the peace – “Laural and evergreen and house plants turned the sanctuary into a scene of living beauty not made with hands. Suspended above the pulpit was a figure of a white dove, and olive branch in its mouth. Peace and reconciliation had come by the Spirit of God! On either side of the chancel were the Words of Psalms 29 and 85: ‘The Lord will give strength unto his people; the Lord will bless his people with peace [and] Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other’” (Thompson 1978). Rev. Griffith became the rector of Christ (Episcopal) Church in 1780 after serving as chaplain and surgeon of the Third Virginia Regiment for three years during the war. His actions following independence were instrumental in preserving the Church of England in Virginia, when it was re-established as the Episcopal Church (Cecere 2007, Sydnor 1975, Webb 2006).

[We] request you to render thanks to Almighty God for all his mercies spiritual and temporal, and in a particular manner for establishing the Independence of the United States of America. He is the Supreme Disposer of all events, and to him belongs the glory, the victory, and the majesty. We are persuaded you will easily recollect many circumstances [There follows an articulation of numerous particular circumstances.]

There is no doubt that you took it as a happy circumstance in the late revolution, that the rights of conscience are unalienably secured, and even interwoven with the very constitutions of the several states ... It is a truth of much moment, and particularly to be remembered at this time, not only that the virtue of the people in general is of consequence to the stability of every civil society, but that it is of much greater moment to the stability of republics or free states, than those of a different kind. In monarchies, a sense of honour, the subordination of rank in society, and the vigour of despotic authority, supply in some measure the place of virtue, in producing the public order; but in free states, where the power is ultimately lodged in the body of the people, if there is a general corruption of the mass, the government itself must speedily be dissolved.

We look upon it as a very happy circumstance in the political revolution that has happened in America, that neither in its rise nor progress was it intermixed or directed by religious controversies. No denominations of Christians among us have any reason to fear oppression or restraint, or any power to oppress others ... The ultimate trial of religious truth is by its moral influence; therefore, as he is undoubtedly the best husbandman who raises the richest crops, so these are the best principles, which make the best men. This is the great rule laid down by our Saviour, by their fruits ye shall know them.⁶⁷ (Presbyterian Church 1783, Ingham 2001)

At midnight on Christmas Eve 1783, George Washington arrived at Mount Vernon after resigning his commission as commander of the Continental Army at Annapolis, Maryland. On New Year's Eve, Richard Conway expressed the sentiments of Alexandrians at that moment in a letter he sent to Washington as mayor of the town –

The Mayor and Commonalty of Alexandria, impressed with the liveliest Sentiments of affection and gratitude, do most sincerely congratulate your Excellency on your return from the conclusion of a glorious and successful war to domestic happiness and tranquillity.

We experience a Singular Satisfaction in reflecting that your residence in our neighbourhood will have a happy influence as well on the growth & prosperity, of this infant Town, as on the morals and conduct of its inhabitants.

Penetrated with a Sense of the inestimable Services which you have rendered your Country; and attached to your person by a long acquaintance with your virtues, it is and shall be our prayer, that Heaven may preserve you in health; and prolong a life which it has decreed should be of much importance to mankind. (Letter from Richard Conway to George Washington 31 December 1783 at founders.archives.gov)

⁶⁷ Church historian William Warren Sweet declared that – “No church [i.e., denomination] in America, at the close of the war for independence, was in a better position for immediate expansion than was the Presbyterian ... Presbyterians had supported the cause of independence with almost one hundred percent unanimity, and came through the Revolution with a united front and increased prestige” (Sweet 1936). Other church historians, even when not providing a quite so confident assessment of the post-war status of the Presbyterian Church, find themselves in agreement with the sentiment that its influence during the revolutionary period had been pivotal (Kramer 1953-54, Terman 1974, Smylie 1974, Tiedemann 2005, Gardiner 2013).

A new era was at hand for the nation and for the residents of Alexandria. During the immediate post-war years, Alexandria would experience numerous profound changes – regularly scheduled stagecoach service, the town’s first, which extended first to Baltimore and New York City, and shortly thereafter to Richmond; a permanent facility of market stalls for the sale of agricultural products was erected on the site of the current City Hall; a hometown newspaper came to be published – *Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser*; actions were again taken to further open the Potomac River to navigation above the Great Falls; major enhancements of the town’s commercial and port facilities were undertaken; a wheat inspection station to insure the quality of this increasingly important export was established; and the construction of a second tobacco inspection station on the southern portion of the waterfront at Franklin Street was considered.⁶⁸

In October 1784, James Madison, then a member of Virginia’s House of Delegates, proposed that Virginia and Maryland engage in the discussion of topics of mutual interest pertaining to those portions of the Potomac River and of the Chesapeake Bay that they shared – inter-colony consultations such as this had been prohibited during the colonial period. In March 1785, four delegates from each state initiated discussions at Alexandria’s assembly hall but made little progress. After a few days, the commissioners reconvened at Mount Vernon at the invitation of George Washington and the ensuing discussions produced an agreement that came to be known as the *Potomac River Pact* (also known as the *Mount Vernon Convention*). The joint agreement addressed matters such as aids to navigation; fishing rights; adoption of systems of common tolls; uniform valuation of foreign currency; interest rates on domestic bills of exchange; and a joint naval protection agreement. The legislatures of both states quickly ratified the agreement (Rowland 1888, Caton 1933, Shomette 1985, Sweig 1987, Rothbard and Newman 2019, Bish 2023, Letter from George Washington to Benjamin Harrison 10 October 1784).

The success of the deliberations at Mount Vernon led to calls for discussions between representatives from five states in Annapolis the following year, 1785, at what became known as the Meeting of Commissioners to Remedy Defects of the Federal Government (also as the

⁶⁸ A boost to the local economy occurred in 1779, when the Commonwealth of Virginia created an office for the customs collector in Alexandria, replacing the one that had existed since 1773 near the mouth of the Potomac River – for many decades, Alexandria then served as the sole port of entry for foreign ships on the Potomac River (Alexandrians 1779, Shomette 1985 2003, Herzog 2020).

In 1780, in a demonstration of the increasingly well-developed state of commerce in Alexandria, two local merchants, Amable and Alexander Lory, advertised the availability of Frenchman Denis Diderot’s twenty-eight-volume unprecedented compendium of Enlightenment knowledge – *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (1751-1772) – as available for sale for fifteen hogsheads of tobacco or £90,000. Alexandria is the only place known to have had the work available for sale in America. Thomas Jefferson, then serving as governor of Virginia, arranged for its purchase by the commonwealth “for the use of the public” (Letters between Thomas Jefferson, Amable Lory, Alexander Lory, and John Fitzgerald at founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson, Jackson 1965, Rogers 2018).

In 1785, *An Act [of the Virginia General Assembly] for Opening and Extending the Navigation of the Potomack River* (issued 4 January 1784), became one of the first items to be published by Alexandria’s new printing operation established by George Richards (Rowland 1888).

In 1787, a petition was sent by Alexandrians to the commonwealth’s General Assembly to establish a wheat inspection station in an effort to make this increasingly important export product competitive with higher quality wheat being shipped from Baltimore and Philadelphia; it was accepted (Alexandrians 1787c, Peterson 1932a, Hunter 2001).

Two petitions were sent to the General Assembly regarding the establishment of a new tobacco warehouse – one supporting it in 1786 and one opposing it in 1787. Demonstrating the declining importance of tobacco as an export commodity from Northern Virginia, the assembly rejected both petitions (Miller 1991-92).

Annapolis Convention). Delegates from five states – New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia – attended. These inter-state meetings were also deemed successful and led to the call for a convention of delegates from all states to consider possible improvements that might be made to the central government, the Congress of the Confederation, in Philadelphia the following year, 1787.

The Philadelphia Convention of 1787, subsequently to be known as the Constitutional Convention, would end up dissolving the existing *Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union* and prepare the framework for an entirely new system of government, the *Constitution of the United States of America*. This remarkable string of events took place within two years of the call for meetings in Alexandria to discuss local jurisdictional issues between Virginia's and Maryland's adjacent waterways (Rowland 1888, McDonald 1965, Morrow 1999, Morgan 2002, Papenfuss and Coale 2003, Lepore 2018, Holton 2021).⁶⁹

On 17 September 1787, the proposed new form of governance for the nation – the *Constitution of the United States of America* – was signed by delegates of the Constitutional Convention – it appeared in print in Philadelphia newspaper two days later. On 28 September, the proposed federal Constitution received a public reading in Alexandria; it was approved by general acclimation; and delegates to a forthcoming meeting in Fairfax County were elected, including congregation members David Arell, William Hunter, Jr., and Charles Simms. On 2 October 1787, the Constitution was read one more time at a public gathering at Old Price's Field in Fairfax County – it was unanimously approved by that day's assemblage (Alexandrians 1787a, Residents of Fairfax County 1787, *Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser* 13 and 27 September and 11 October 1787). A petition was then prepared that read –

We, the freeholders of the county of Fairfax, conceiving that the peace, security, and prosperity of the state of Virginia, and the united states of America in general, do depend on the speedy adoption of the system of government recommended by the late general convention of the united states; and that this end will be advanced by an immediate recommendation from the legislature of this state, to subject the same to a convention of delegates, chosen by the freeholders thereof, for their assent and ratification, do therefore direct you, our representatives, to declare the opinion of your constituents, in the next general assembly of this state, to be for the immediate convocation of a convention of delegates from the several counties and boroughs of this state, for the said purpose. (Residents of Fairfax County 1787)

Copies of this petition were circulated among freeholders in Alexandria and Fairfax County for their signature. The signed petitions were then forwarded to Virginia's Ratification Convention, convened in Richmond, 2-27 June 1788, to demonstrate local support for the nation's new governing document.⁷⁰ When New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the constitution on

⁶⁹ Foreign trade constraints were much on the minds of Alexandria merchants, including twenty congregation members, who petitioned the commonwealth's General Assembly to promote a more effective national government, specifically "that the merchants of the United States may be placed upon an equal footing with the merchants of foreign nations carrying on trade with them, and that [the Confederation] Congress may be enabled to treat with foreign powers respecting commerce upon terms of confidence and advantage [and] that in this instance, the Confederation should be altered and amended, by giving them such power as be adequate to the great and important object [of foreign trade]" (Alexandrians 1785).

⁷⁰ Among those who agreed – "to wait on such of the freeholders in their respective neighbourhoods, as happens not to be present at this meeting, with copies of the aforesaid instructions, in order that they may sign them" – were

21 June 1788, a new government for the United States of America was formally put into effect. On 4 March 1789, when the U.S. Congress convened in New York City, a new general (national) government formally began operating.

As the nation adopted a new form of governance, Alexandria was poised to enter a remarkable age of economic prosperity. The historian Glenn Crothers describes the moment –

[T]he revolution initiated an optimistic era of social change and economic improvement that profoundly altered the nature of revolutionary ideology and encouraged the formation of a commercial and liberal ethos that celebrated economic self-interest and individual rights ... Northern Virginia stood at the forefront of economic and social modernization, a paradigm of commercial and entrepreneurial industriousness. Responding to changes in worldwide demand, farmers and planters of Virginia's upper northern neck abandoned their traditional staple, tobacco, and began growing grains. This switch, in turn, spurred broader economic changes. Transportation links were developed to bring in the new staples from the backcountry to the port of Alexandria. Grain farming also spurred the development of new industries and significant urban growth [of Alexandria in particular]. Equally notable, the merchants and farmers of Northern Virginia vigorously campaigned for the creation of banks to fund economic development. Finally, the region's inhabitants actively contributed to technological innovation and agricultural improvement. (Crothers 1997)

congregation members David Arell, Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick, John Harper, William Hunter, Jr., James Keith, Charles Little, and Charles Simms.

As one might imagine, discussion about the proposed constitution was very much the topic of the day. One such conversation included congregation member Olney Winsor while he visited with George Washington at Mount Vernon in March 1788. Writing to his wife in Rhode Island, Winsor reported that – “After dinner the new Constitution was introduced as the subject of conversation and sundry questions asked me by the General and Mr. Humphreys [Colonel David Humphreys (1752-1818) of Connecticut, a friend of Washington's from the war then residing for a spell at Mount Vernon] respecting the part I expected your State [Rhode Island, where his wife still resided] would take. I wish I could have given them more pleasing and encouraging answers, but we all hoped for the best. The General expressed himself on the Subject with such real concern for the united happiness of the States, & at the same time with such clearness on those parts of the Constitution which have been objected to as not being sufficiently explicit, that I was as much pleased with him as a private man, a former of a system for the United States, as I have heretofore been in his military character” (Hambleton 1982, Flaig 2014). It would not be until May 1790 for Rhode Island to ratify the Constitution, more than a year after the federal government had begun functioning in New York City.