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Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below

Michael A. McDonnell

In the fall of 1775, George Gilmer, friend and physician to Thomas Jefferson and himself a member of the gentry of Albemarle County, Virginia, wrote an address to his neighbors lamenting the lack of support for the new military establishment created that August by the colony's extralegal revolutionary government, the Third Virginia Convention. The problem, Gilmer believed, was the decline in popular enthusiasm for the cause manifested in the poor rate of enlistment for the new "minuteman" service: "I know not from what cause, but every denomination of the people seem backward; the Convention have altered the name Volunteers to that of Minute Men, and behold! what a wondrous effect it has had. Out of near three hundred Volunteers there are how many Minute Men? So few that I am afraid to name them." He noted the striking contrast between the ardor of a few months before and the present: "We were once all fire, now most of us are become inanimate and indifferent." He pleaded with his neighbors to "rouze what spirit resides in our constitutions" and "become . . . Minute men, or we shall not know who to call on in the moment of danger." "This is a matter, Gentlemen," Gilmer gravely concluded, "that requires your most serious attention, on your own, as well as your Country's account."¹

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¹ George Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," [fall 1775], in "Papers, Military and Political, 1775–1778, of George Gilmer, M.D., of 'Pen Park,' Albemarle County, Virginia," ed. R. A. Brock, Virginia Historical Society, *Collections*, new series, 6 (1887), 122, 125. Gilmer was active in politics and served as a stand-in for Thomas Jefferson in the Virginia conventions of 1774–1775 while the latter served in the Continental Congress. We can safely date the address cited here as later than September 11, probably a few weeks later. On Gilmer's life, see Robert L. Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, vol. III: *The Breaking Storm and the Third Convention* (Charlottesville, 1977), 50.

Indeed, the minuteman service was designed to play a pivotal role in Virginia's defense amid escalating hostilities through the summer and fall of 1775. Established when popular enthusiasm for the war was high, it was supposed to be the truly revolutionary backbone of Virginians' defense of their liberties. Replacing the royally controlled militia as the ideological alternative to a standing army, the minute service was designed to ready 8,000 "citizen-soldiers" for service at short notice—men "in whose Hands the Sword may be safely trusted," as a creator of the service put it. Even the appellation "minuteman" was designed to evoke an image of the mass popular resistance to perceived British tyranny already immortalized in New England in the first skirmishes of the war—an image still strong in the pantheon of American historical myths.²

Virginia, too, was supposed to have its minuteman heroes. But the minute service in Virginia failed miserably and was quickly forgotten. Gilmer's complaints about poor recruiting for the minutemen in his county were paralleled throughout the colony, and the minute service never came close to attracting a full complement of men. Consequently, it entirely failed in providing for the colony's defense, pushing the gentry into relying wholeheartedly on the kind of paid, professional regular army vilified by revolutionary rhetoric. But the minute service was not simply the victim of an early death in Virginia of the continental *rage militaire* that gripped the rest of the colonies until at least the end of the following year; indeed, as Gilmer's comments imply, the minute service was *responsible* for the demise of popular enthusiasm for the cause in Virginia. Before the minutemen were established, "Volunteers presented themselves from every direction" and "Every rank and denomination of people [were] full of marshal notions." After the minuteman plan was introduced, it was reported that "Virginia is in the greatest confusion," and that the "Continental Spirit" had been "retarded by internal Divisions" caused by the new military establishment. The failure of the minute service, then, played a key role in Virginia's war-time mobilization and its revolutionary movement.³

More important, the reasons why the minuteman plan failed illustrate a more enduring conflict than the one against Britain: the one between the governors and the governed, between the gentry and the "lower" and "middling sorts." That conflict has been masked in its scale and detail by an elite bias in the available sources. Small farmers in Virginia in the eighteenth century left very few written records of

² George Mason to George Washington, Oct. 14, 1775, in *The Papers of George Mason, 1725–1792*, ed. Robert A. Rutland (3 vols., Chapel Hill, 1970), I, 255–56. See Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976), 59.

³ Nov. 19–20, 1775, entries in *Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal, 1775–1776*. . . , ed. Robert Greenhalgh Albion and Leonidas Dodson (Princeton, 1934), 133–34; W. W. Abbot et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series* (7 vols., Charlottesville, 1985–), I, 24; George Gilmer to Thomas Jefferson, [July 26 or 27, 1775], in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd et al. (27 vols., Princeton, 1950–), I, 238; Fielding Lewis to George Washington, Nov. 14, 1775, in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 53 (Jan. 1929), 93; June 6, 1775, entry in *Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal, 1775–1776*, ed. Albion and Dodson, 24. For the continental experience, see Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* (New York, 1979), 25. The prevailing opinion in the historiography is that the minuteman establishment was a success and that it was replaced because of the need for more regular troops. See John Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775–1783* (Williamsburg, 1988), 77–78, 129; and E. M. Sanchez-Saavedra, "All Fine Fellows and Well-Armed: The Culpeper Minute Battalion, 1775–1776," *Virginia Cavalcade*, 24 (no. 1, 1974), 4–12.

their thoughts and experiences. Most Virginians, particularly nongentry Virginians, lived in an oral-aural world—perhaps as many as 75 percent of adults in the colony could not even sign their names. So we are left with the writings of the very few, predominantly gentry, Virginians who left “traditional” accounts and sources and who were reluctant to “wash their dirty linen in public,” as one scholar has noted.⁴

Yet the reasons for the failure of the minute service, particularly from the point of view of ordinary Virginians, though elusive, are not impossible to reconstruct. There is at least one path that will bring us closer to the mind-set of small farmers in Virginia, and to a fuller picture of the Revolution in Virginia. By applying the methodology used by Rhys Isaac beyond the gentry world that was his main concern, we can find the alternative and often conflicting meanings of the Revolution for ordinary Virginians by placing their actions within the context of events. In this case, though it is difficult to reconstruct what ordinary Virginians thought about the war, we can determine when they did or did not fight. By comparing when men would fight with the moments when they refused, we can assess why men acted as they did. By examining the *experience* of military service, then, we can begin to piece together the *meaning* of service for the different participants. Thus, the story of the minute service is important in the first place because it allows us insight into the normally inaccessible world of the small farmer in Virginia.⁵

Resistance to the minute service among the middling sort in Virginia, it becomes clear, was not over whether or not to fight the British, but over how and on whose “terms” to do so. The *conditions* of service were often decisive in the choice of a farmer to fight or not. Throughout the Revolutionary War, small farmers in Virginia grounded their patriotism in the economic realities of small-scale farming (with few or no slaves and little other help). They desired a more egalitarian distribution of the burden of war, a more democratic and consensual military organization, and equal-

⁴ In defining groups in eastern Virginia, I have followed John Selby, who concluded that the “typical white Virginia male was a small farmer. . . [who] had access to no more than a couple of hundred acres, at most a slave or two, and some cattle.” Just under 50% of white males were small landowners, 10–20% tenants (concentrated in the Northern Neck), and 20–30% agricultural laborers or indentured servants. “Small farmers,” or the “middling sort,” were those in the first two groups; “poor whites,” or the “lower sort,” refers to the third group. The final 10% of white males were the gentry, who owned half the land in Virginia and almost half the personal property and occupied most important posts of leadership and authority at provincial and local levels. See Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 24. On the predominantly nonliterate world of Virginia, see Rhys Isaac, “Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33 (July 1976), esp. 357–64. Emory G. Evans, “Trouble in the Backcountry: Disaffection in Southwest Virginia during the American Revolution,” in *An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry during the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Thad Tate, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1985), 180.

⁵ My methodology has been influenced by Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), esp. 323–59; Isaac, “Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution,” 357–64; and works of the new military historians, beginning with John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (Ann Arbor, 1990). More recent works drawn on here include Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*; Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the “Lower Sort” during the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, 1987); and James Titus, *The Old Dominion at War: Society, Politics, and Warfare in Late Colonial Virginia* (Columbia, S.C., 1991). On this school, see E. Wayne Carp, “Early American Military History: A Review of Recent Work,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 94 (July 1986), 259–84; and Don Higginbotham, “The Early American Way of War: Reconnaissance and Appraisal,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (April 1987), 230–73.

ity within the service. When policy makers did not take these considerations into account, ordinary Virginians refused to serve. They thereby demonstrated their commitment to an “alternative popular political culture,” very similar to the one prevailing in the backcountry and very different from the expectations of the gentry.⁶

Contained within the small farmers’ demands were the seeds of an ideal of political and social relations outside of military service very different from that held by the leading gentry, an ideal that would help shape the contours of political life in the new independent republic. Indeed, through their participation, or refusal to serve, in the military, ordinary Virginians not only articulated alternative ideas about the political society in which they lived but, more important, exercised power to make those demands heard. Ultimately, small farmers’ wartime resistance to unfavorable military policy, beginning with the minutemen, helped develop their ideas about the nature of political and social relations, demonstrated the limits of the authority of the gentry, and irrevocably changed postwar politics in the Old Dominion.

Such an interpretation leads us closer to overturning two powerful and interrelated historiographical trends. First, the story of the failure of the minutemen challenges the traditional and enduring picture of an organically unified white Virginia society before and during the Revolution. Such a view originated with earlier historians of prerevolutionary Virginia who emphasized the homogeneity and harmony of the colony and of the ruling class. Common interests, such as landownership, tobacco, slavery, and racism, wedded small farmers and wealthy ruling planters and created fertile ground for not just a “stable, hierarchical, consensual—or deferential—community” but also an emerging and consensual republicanism.⁷ In this story, ordinary Virginians, whose voices are rarely heard, mobilized easily and quietly behind the gentry whose inferred motives for rebellion included desires to defend their constitutional rights, to repudiate debts, to free western lands from imperial restrictions, to achieve economic independence, or to “renew” or save themselves from an internal “cultural crisis.”⁸ Whatever the reasons for rebellion, recent scholar-

⁶ On a popular political culture that was an alternative to the gentry’s, see Albert H. Tillson Jr., *Gentry and Common Folk: Political Culture on a Virginia Frontier, 1740–1789* (Lexington, Ky., 1991); and Albert H. Tillson Jr., “The Militia and Popular Political Culture in the Upper Valley of Virginia, 1740–1775,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 94 (July 1986), 285–306. Tillson’s work also points to the need to recognize subtler distinctions and gradations of disaffection than the traditional Tory-Patriot dichotomy.

⁷ Herbert Sloan and Peter Onuf, “Politics, Culture, and the Revolution in Virginia: A Review of Recent Work,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 91 (July 1983), 267. For the interpretation that created the image of a unified Virginia, see Charles Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington’s Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1952); numerous works by Jack P. Greene, but especially Jack P. Greene, “Society, Ideology, and Politics: An Analysis of the Political Culture of Mid-Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” in *Society, Freedom, and Conscience: The Coming of the Revolution in Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York*, ed. Richard M. Jellison (New York, 1976), 14–76; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1976), book 4; Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986); T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (New Brunswick, 1985); and Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*.

⁸ Sloan and Onuf, “Politics, Culture, and the Revolution in Virginia,” 260–74; Marc Egnal, “The Origins of the Revolution in Virginia: A Reinterpretation,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 37 (July 1980), 401–28; Marc Egnal and Joseph A. Ernst, “An Economic Interpretation of the American Revolution,” *ibid.*, 29 (Jan. 1972), 3–32; Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 160–203; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, part II; Rhys Isaac, “Preachers and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia,” in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (De Kalb, 1976), 125–56.

ship has revived that traditional notion of revolutionary Virginia by emphasizing consensus—what Rhys Isaac has called “the remarkable phenomenon of Virginia’s dissent-free mobilization for rebellion and revolution”—and downplaying internal wartime division, upheaval, and change.⁹

Recently, however, scholars have begun to question the homogeneity and harmony of prewar Virginia as they have looked at the diverse and diverging interests of growing groups of merchants, wheat growers, backcountry farmers, dissenting sectarians, laborers and the “lower sort,” and even those who challenged that stability from within, enslaved Virginians. We now have a much fuller understanding of why, as Gordon S. Wood noted over thirty years ago, the gentry voiced “a growing sense of impending ruin” on the eve of the Revolution. For there are now clear indications that even among the white agricultural communities the “consensus” on which the gentry premised their authority to command was coming undone.¹⁰

For many of the ruling class, the Revolution may be seen as an attempt to reassert control, authority, and legitimacy. As this essay will show, the gentry’s approach to mobilizing for war shows a conservative and fearful group clinging to traditional notions of hierarchy, deference, and public virtue in an attempt to maintain an increasingly challenged social and political culture. But the struggle with a politicized middling and lower class over mobilization during the Revolutionary War would further and finally erode that authority and demonstrate to the gentry the finality of their failure to govern by old standards and the pressing need to recast

⁹ Isaac, “Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution,” 367. Though Isaac pictures prewar Virginia society as confrontational, he maintains that dissenters and Patriots came together during the conflict with Britain. See Isaac, “Preachers and Patriots.” Even such a neo-Progressive as Edward Countryman concludes that whites in the Old Dominion entered the Revolution “as something close to a united people.” See Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (London, 1985), 120. Cf. Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, xi. See also Emory G. Evans, “Executive Leadership in Virginia, 1776–1781: Henry, Jefferson, and Nelson,” in *Sovereign States in an Age of Uncertainty*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1981), 185–225. On this “revised consensus,” see Sloan and Onuf, “Politics, Culture, and the Revolution in Virginia,” 260–67. More local studies have uncovered wartime disaffection, though usually on the margins of Virginia. See Adele Hast, *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore* (Ann Arbor, 1982); Tillson, *Gentry and Common Folk*; and Evans, “Trouble in the Backcountry.” Two other notable challenges to the picture of a united Virginia are Dale Benson, “Wealth and Power in Virginia, 1774–1776: A Study of the Organization of Revolt” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maine, 1970); and John D. McBride, “The Virginia War Effort, 1775–1783: Manpower Policies and Practices” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1977). And see Michael A. McDonnell, “The Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia: Military Culture and Political and Social Relations, 1774–1783” (D. Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1995). For an early recognition that Virginia was plagued with internal problems during the war, see Hamilton J. Eckenrode, *The Revolution in Virginia* (1917; Hamden, Conn., 1964), esp. 232–60.

¹⁰ Gordon S. Wood, “Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23 (Jan. 1966), 28. The most original of the new Virginia studies describes dramatic challenges to the gentry from other groups. See Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Williamsburg, Institute of Early American History and Culture, forthcoming). See also Titus, *Old Dominion at War*; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, part II; Isaac, “Preachers and Patriots”; Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists’ Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 31 (July 1974), 345–68; and Richard R. Beeman and Rhys Isaac, “Cultural Conflict and Social Change in the Revolutionary South: Lunenburg County, Virginia,” *Journal of Southern History*, 46 (Nov. 1980), 525–50. On the rise of the merchant class, see Jacob Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly, 1674–1791, and of Its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades* (2 vols., Ann Arbor, 1973); Jacob Price, “The Rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake Tobacco Trade, 1707–1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 11 (April 1954), 179–99; Bruce Ragsdale, *A Planter’s Republic: The Search for Economic Independence in Revolutionary Virginia* (Madison, 1996); and Benson, “Wealth and Power in Virginia.” On the rise of wheat growing, see Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 180–82 and notes.

their leadership. The transition from a deferential to a more republican political culture was forged and fueled by conflict, not consensus.¹¹

That transition—the conflict and its consequences in Virginia—brings into focus a second, more general historical interpretation, Carl Lotus Becker's claim that the American Revolution was as much a conflict over who would rule at home as one over home rule. Though Becker's conclusions have been challenged and refined, it is now generally recognized that all across the colonies and new states, popular upheaval and social protest before, during, and after the war was endemic and involved hundreds of thousands of ordinary people, male and female, black, white, and Native American.¹² However, the apparent absence of internal conflict in Virginia, arguably the most important rebel colony of all, has undermined efforts to portray the war for independence as truly revolutionary. Even conceding internal strife in most colonies, historians could point to its absence in Virginia and conclude that internal upheaval was not necessary or even relevant in explaining the revolutionary outcome. A demonstration of social conflict in Virginia is the final—and cornerstone—piece of the neo-Progressive interpretation, more broadly defined.

More important, the story of Virginia in the Revolution also helps show how internal conflict and social protest were crucial to that revolutionary settlement. For all we know and are learning about the nuances and diversity of internal conflict, we still need to understand and appreciate fully the *consequences* of that internal popular upheaval on state and national political and social developments. An examination of the minuteman establishment and the war in the Old Dominion in general will show that, as in the Philadelphia militia and elsewhere, the experiences and actions of ordinary people at war were as important as political and imperial issues in shaping the revolutionary transformations that took place.¹³

Both the origins of the minute service and the roots of its failure lay in the establishment that it was designed to replace, the "Independent Companies of Volunteers" that had begun forming between fall 1774 and summer 1775. This initial effort at

¹¹ However strong or weak deferential behavior was in prerevolutionary Virginia, many members of the gentry sought to reassert it as an ideal during the Revolution. On the weakness of deference in Virginia and elsewhere, see Jack P. Greene, *Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities: Essays in Early American Cultural History* (Charlottesville, 1992), 181–207.

¹² Carl Lotus Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (Madison, 1909). The literature substantiating and adding nuance to Becker's dual-revolution thesis is large, but good starting points are Young, ed., *American Revolution*; Alfred F. Young, ed., *Beyond the American Revolution* (De Kalb, 1990); and the seminal work, Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979). Good state studies in the neo-Progressive tradition include Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790* (Baltimore, 1981); Richard Alan Ryerson, *The Revolution Is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765–1776* (Philadelphia, 1978); Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class*; Ronald Hoffman, *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics, and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1973); Marjoleine Kars, "‘Breaking Loose Together’: Religion and Rebellion in the North Carolina Piedmont, 1730–1790" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1994); and Rachel N. Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of a Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760–1808* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

¹³ On the radicalism and lasting influence of the Philadelphia militia, see especially Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class*. See also Gregory T. Knouff, "‘An Arduous Service’: The Pennsylvania Backcountry Soldiers’ Revolution," *Pennsylvania History*, 61 (Jan. 1994), 45–74.

organizing a military force was crucial in shaping subsequent military policy, for it set a precedent—frightening for the gentry, exemplary for small farmers. To understand the failure of the minute service, we need to understand why the independent companies were successful, what was really “altered,” as Gilmer noted, between the “Volunteer” and minuteman companies, and why Virginia leaders sought to replace the volunteers with minutemen.

In the aftermath of the Boston Port Act, as relations began to worsen between the colonies and Britain during the summer and fall of 1774, Virginia’s elite leadership confronted the problem of rallying popular support for further and more disruptive resistance efforts. The last economic boycott, of 1768–1770, had ended ignominiously—“soon forgotten, so basely deserted, and both the letter and the spirit of it kicked out of doors.” In summer 1774, there was every indication that stronger measures would be necessary, but the gentry could not take popular support for granted. In the dramatic days immediately following the news of the Boston Port Act, a report was circulated in the Northern Neck that “The lower Class of People here are in a tumult on the account of Reports from Boston, many of them expect to be press’d & compell’d to go and fight the Britains!” Such reports must have worried the gentry, who could remember that the “lower Class of People” had singularly rejected their general calls to join the provincial army during the French and Indian War and had resisted efforts to conscript them to fight. Moreover, Virginia had little in the way of a universal military tradition, especially on the eastern side of the Blue Ridge Mountains: in most places the militia, if functioning, had long since taken on a largely symbolic social role. The general population had rarely been called upon to fight. Consequently, drawing on lessons learned in the French and Indian War, the gentry moved cautiously and refused to call for mandatory service.¹⁴

Instead, they tried to mobilize popular *opinion* by beginning an informal movement, in September 1774, to form extralegal “Independent” or “Volunteer” companies of “Gentlemen.” Rather than try to mobilize all men and risk upheaval, the gentry established military companies that were voluntary, exclusive, and amenable to their own sense of propriety. Paralleling efforts during the French and Indian War to organize “an Association of Gent[leme]n,” in part to inspire “lesser” men to take up arms, the volunteer companies were thus generally organized on very different terms than the colonial militia or previous volunteer or conscript armies. These companies were not designed for the “common” sort; they were established to “rouse the attention of the public,” to “excite others by [their] Example,” and to “infuse a martial spirit of emulation.” These were preliminary preparations: one member of the gentry believed these companies to be useful, not because they would provide a first line of defense, but because they would “provide a fund of officers; that in case of absolute necessity, the people might be better enabled to act in defence of their invaded liberty.” The gentry would thus ready themselves, train, and if war came, go

¹⁴ On the question of the extent of popular backing for the gentry in summer 1774, see McDonnell, “Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia,” chap. 1. *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), March 8, 1770, quoted in Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 195; May 31, 1774, entry in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773–1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (1943; Williamsburg, 1957), 111. On the problems of raising men in the French and Indian War, see Titus, *Old Dominion at War*.

forth among the people to assume leadership roles on the field of battle and in more traditional military organizations.¹⁵

Limited membership and the terms on which these companies came together reinforced the exclusivity of the independent companies. Though some of the companies stipulated a maximum of 100 in each unit, the numbers enrolled were usually much smaller. In Dunmore County, which embodied one of the largest companies, only 87 men enrolled out of an eligible fighting population of approximately 800 males. Similarly, the 23 men who enlisted in the company from Albemarle represented less than 1.8 percent of the county's 1,314 eligible males. The more material terms of enrollment seemed tailored to exclude less wealthy farmers and in effect played the role that property qualifications for office played in civil life: Among other accoutrements, each member of the unit had to provide his own uniform, in "Blue, turn'd up with Buff," complete with "Coat & Breeches & white Stockings," along with "a good Fire-lock and Bayonet" and six pounds of gunpowder, twenty pounds of lead, and fifty gun flints, "at the least." It was generally reported that membership in the new independent companies was to be confined to "gentlemen of the first fortune and character." George Mason later boasted that his own company, from Fairfax County, when first formed "consisted entirely of Gentlemen."¹⁶ Consequently, between September 1774 and April 1775, when actual fighting broke out, no more than a handful of volunteer companies were raised throughout Virginia.¹⁷

¹⁵ Titus, *Old Dominion at War*, 144; George Mason, "Fairfax County Militia Association," [Sept. 21, 1774], in *Papers of George Mason*, ed. Rutland, I, 210; George Mason, "Remarks on Annual Elections for the Fairfax Independent Company," [April 17–26, 1775], *ibid.*, 229.

¹⁶ For the estimates of those eligible for military service in Dunmore and Albemarle counties, see the manuscript list published as "The Number of Men of Military Age in Virginia in 1776," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 18 (Jan. 1910), 34–35. "Declaration of Subscribers to the First Independent Company of Dunmore County," [after Jan. 1775?], Dunmore County Committee of Safety Papers (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond); Mason, "Fairfax County Militia Association," 211; Mason to [Mr. Brent?], Oct. 2, 1778, in *Papers of George Mason*, ed. Rutland, I, 434. See also "Report of the Committee to inquire into the causes of the late disturbances. . . .," June 1, 1775, "The Proceedings of the House of Burgesses of Virginia," in *Records of the States of the United States*, ed. William S. Jenkins (Washington, 1949) (microfilm: Virginia, 1b, reel 3, 1773–1781). I would like to thank Woody Holton for this reference. A quantitative analysis of a volunteer company from Albemarle corroborates Mason's observation. George Gilmer listed 23 men under his copy of the company's "Terms of Inlisting," April 18, 1775. See Autograph Diary and Revolutionary Memoranda of Dr. George Gilmer (Virginia Historical Society). (The printed edition of these papers lists 24 additional men, but taken from rolls drawn up later. See Brock, ed., "Papers, Military and Political, . . . of George Gilmer," 69–140.) Of the original 23 men, 15 were found on the 1782 Albemarle County personal property tax lists, and 15 on the 1782 land tax lists (4 appeared on only one list). Between them, they owned 232 slaves (an average of 15 each), 403 cattle (27 each), and 114 horses (8 each). They owned a total of 14,594 acres of land (an average of 973 each). Albemarle County Personal Property Tax Records, 1782 (Virginia State Library, Richmond); Albemarle County Land Tax Records, 1782, *ibid.* In 1787 the average Piedmont farmer might own just over 300 acres, and among the 70% who owned slaves, the average holding was 7.6 each. See Jackson Turner Main, "The Distribution of Property in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 41 (Sept. 1954), 241–58.

¹⁷ William C. White, "The Independent Companies of Virginia, 1774–1775," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 86 (April 1978), 151; McDonnell, "Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia," 35–36. According to White's list, most counties in which companies formed were in the lower Piedmont, along either side of the fall line. No companies appear to have been formed in southwestern Virginia, outside of Amherst County, and only a few in the Tidewater. On the volunteer movement before April 1775, see Feb. 25, 1775, entry in *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774–1777* (London, 1925), 57; Charles Lee to Robert Morris, Jan. 27, 1775, in *The Lee Papers* (4 vols.), New York Historical Society, *Collections* (1871–1874), I, 168; Lord Dunmore to Dartmouth, Dec. 24, 1774, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (379 vols., Washington, 1931–1944), III, 248n; and James Madison to William Bradford, Nov. 26, 1774, in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal (Chicago, 1962–), I, 129.

Because the new independent companies were established by the gentry, and for gentlemen alone, they were organized on a much more consensual and egalitarian basis than militia or regular army units. Service in an independent company was voluntary, as "Subscribers" entered into a "bond." Unlike soldiers in the militia or other regular military units, the members of the company were not bound to serve by law but "by the sacred ties of virtue, Honor, and love to our Country," and "the words of Gentlemen." More significantly different were the provisions for the appointment of officers and the nature of their command. Officers were to be "of their own Choice," selected "from among our Friends and acquaintance, upon whose Justice, Humanity & Bravery we can relie." Moreover, members promised only to "obey the commands of the officers" that they themselves had "elected from the Inlisted Volunteers." Finally, some associators pledged to "adhere strictly" only "to such resolves which shall be *entered into by a Majority* of the Company."¹⁸

The radical nature of the independent companies was highlighted by one of the gentry. Just prior to the outbreak of hostilities in Virginia, George Mason wrote "Remarks on Annual Elections" of officers for his volunteer company, justifying the practice by appealing to broad principles of natural rights philosophy. Declaring that "All men are by nature born equally free and independent" and that all power was originally "lodged in, and consequently is derived from, the people," Mason argued that frequent appeals to the "body of the people" for their "approbation or dissent" were necessary to prevent the "abuse of authority, and the insolence of office." Moreover, yearly elections of officers would open "a door to the return of officers of approved merit, and will always be a means of excluding unworthy men."¹⁹

Yet it was because the companies were generally small and composed of the "better sort" that the election of officers and a more consensual style of leadership were initially permitted. Mason implied that elections of officers would be acceptable only if a company was composed of gentlemen of equal merit: "In a company thus constituted, no young man will think himself degraded by doing duty in the ranks, which he may in his turn command, or has commanded." Among "equals," Mason could talk of popular elections; the company's exclusivity would allow a "safe" election as competition would be limited to equals of the "better sort," mirroring the safe, almost symbolic, political competitions at the polls in prerevolutionary Virginia. And if the companies consisted only of gentlemen, they could afford to leave regulations, rules, and even actions up to the decision of a majority, democratic vote: indeed, they had to, so gentlemen would not feel "degraded by doing duty in the ranks." With membership generally confined to "gentlemen of the first fortune and character" the companies posed no threat to the established order or to the tradi-

¹⁸ White, "Independent Companies of Virginia," 152; "Terms of Inlisting," [April 1775], in "Papers, Military and Political, . . . of George Gilmer," ed. Brock, 82; Mason, "Remarks on Annual Elections for the Fairfax Independent Company," 229; George Mason, "Fairfax County Militia Plan 'For Embodying the People,'" [Feb. 6, 1775], in *Papers of George Mason*, ed. Rutland, I, 215–16; Mason, "Fairfax County Militia Association," 210–11; "Declaration of Subscribers to the First Independent Company of Dunmore County"; "The First Independent Company of Dunmore," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 44 (April 1936), 102–4 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ Mason, "Remarks on Annual Elections for the Fairfax Independent Company," 229–31.

tional method of raising and structuring the military through a rigid hierarchy, discipline, and clear regulations. Rather, these companies were designed to strengthen and reinforce young gentlemen's own sense of public virtue, responsibility, and belief in their ability and authority to command in the burgeoning crisis. While hostilities had yet to break out, the units resembled elite gentlemen's clubs, rather than formal military units.²⁰

But the start of hostilities in April 1775 caught the gentry off balance, and a window of opportunity thus opened for small farmers. In Virginia British troops under the direction of the royal governor, John Murray, earl of Dunmore, executed a successful midnight raid on the Williamsburg public magazine, removing fifteen half barrels of stockpiled gunpowder only two days after Gen. Thomas Gage botched his similar foray into the Massachusetts countryside. Though the troops went unopposed in their clandestine efforts, news of Dunmore's actions, quickly joined with reports of bloodshed from the north and, importantly, rumors that the governor had threatened to arm the slaves and use them against white Virginians, inflamed the colony and incited a new burst of enthusiastic militarism. "Mars the great god of Battle, is now honoured in every Part of this spacious Colony . . . here every Presence is warlike, every sound is martial!" wrote one observer. "Volunteers presented themselves from every direction," a soldier later recalled, and Gilmer wrote from Williamsburg that "Every rank and denomination of people [are] full of marshal notions."²¹

The vehicles for those martial expressions were the democratically organized "Independent Companies of Volunteers," which now seemed to hold out a tantalizing and most immediate example of revolutionary ideology in practice. Men from all over the colony rushed to join the independent companies. The number of volunteer companies also leaped dramatically: By June 1775 at least thirty-two counties across Virginia had raised companies, and previously quiet regions, such as the Southside, began to stir.²²

Those who now began to rally to arms, however, seemed to look and act different from the "gentlemen" who had previously predominated in the volunteer companies. In George Gilmer and Thomas Jefferson's Albemarle County, for example, membership in the volunteer company blossomed from the 23 who had originally signed on in April, to 74 present at a muster in June (and there was one report that nearly 300 volunteers eventually signed up). By June, however, only 12 of the original company were present, and in the others' place stood an entirely different body of men. Property tax records from 1782 are available for 30 of the 62 new men, and

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 231–32.

²¹ On Dunmore's raid, see Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 1–6. On rumors of Dunmore's threats to arm the slaves and the rumors' effect on white Virginians, see Holton, *Forced Founders*; Peter Wood, "Liberty Is Sweet": African-American Freedom Struggles in the Years before White Independence," in *Beyond the American Revolution*, ed. Young, 163–64; Edward Stabler to Israel Pemberton, May 16, 1775, Photostat Collection (Foundation Library, Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Va.); and Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, 6. June 6, 1775, entry in *Philip Vickers Fithian Journal, 1775–1776*, ed. Albion and Dodson, 24; Abbot et al., eds., *Papers of George Washington*, I, 24n; Gilmer to Jefferson, July 26–27, 1775, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, I, 238.

²² White, "Independent Companies of Virginia," 151. On the raising of the independent companies and their number, see McDonnell, "Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia," chap. 1.

land records for 21. Whereas on the average, each member of the earlier company owned almost 1,000 acres of land, the June soldiers owned only 322 acres each. The new men also owned an average of 5 slaves, 10 cattle, and 3 horses, compared with the 15 slaves, 27 cattle, and 8 horses owned by the average member of the earlier company. Moreover, whereas all the men from the earlier muster for whom tax records are available owned slaves, one-third of the new group owned none.²³

Gone were the white-stockinged gentlemen volunteers. Some counties had lowered the “property” qualifications for joining the independent companies in anticipation of the outbreak of hostilities. In Fairfax County, for example, a new plan “for Embodying the People” in early spring 1775 stipulated that those “who had or could obtain rifles” would form a *separate* company who would “distinguish” themselves by wearing “painted Hunting-Shirts and Indian Boots, or Caps.” The stipulation that the recruits wear blue uniforms “turn’d up with Buff; with . . . Buff Waist Coat & Breeches, & white Stockings” was quietly dropped. In the growing crisis of April and May, most men seemed to ignore any such remaining regulations—if they were not voted out of existence by the swelling numbers of ordinary farmers who began to compose the independent companies. After April descriptions of “*the damned shirt-men*” showed the majority of them to be wearing “an Oznab[urg] Shirt over their Cloaths, a belt around them with a Tommyhawk or Scalping knife.” Clearly, the members of the independent companies were no longer predominantly gentry but more of a cross section of lower to middling farmers.²⁴

Such men now exercised their newfound right to choose officers and to vote to act as they felt appropriate. Following Dunmore’s raid on the magazine, volunteer companies gathered to send offers of assistance to Williamsburg and to “debate” the propriety of marching on the capital to exact vengeance. A large gathering of men from northern Virginia at Fredericksburg was dispersed by the arguments of Virginia’s delegation to Congress, who urged that that body be given a chance to deliberate before action was taken, but a second gathering in Hanover County was not so easily dissuaded. Under the leadership of the popular radical Patrick Henry, volunteers from Albemarle, Orange, and other neighboring counties, now further inflamed by reports of the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord, decided to press on and demand retribution from Dunmore. Acting offensively and independently, this group sent out a small party to seize the receiver general, Richard Corbin, and to force payment for the powder from Dunmore’s royal officials. After that plan failed, the troops were satisfied with a promissary note from Thomas Nelson Jr., a prominent Yorktown merchant and planter, and went home, but not before Henry’s offer of further protection to Williamsburg was refused by a worried Robert Carter

²³ Gilmer, “Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle,” 122; George Gilmer, “List of Volunteers Present at Muster, June 17, 1775,” in “Papers, Political and Military, . . . of George Gilmer,” ed. Brock, 85; “Terms of Inlisting,” 82; Albemarle County Personal Property Tax Records, 1782; Albemarle County Land Tax Records, 1782.

²⁴ Mason, “Fairfax County Militia Plan ‘For Embodying the People,’” 215–16; Isaac, “Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution,” 381. On the popularization of military mobilization as seen through the medium of uniforms and outward assertions of martial ardor, see *ibid.*, 379–80.



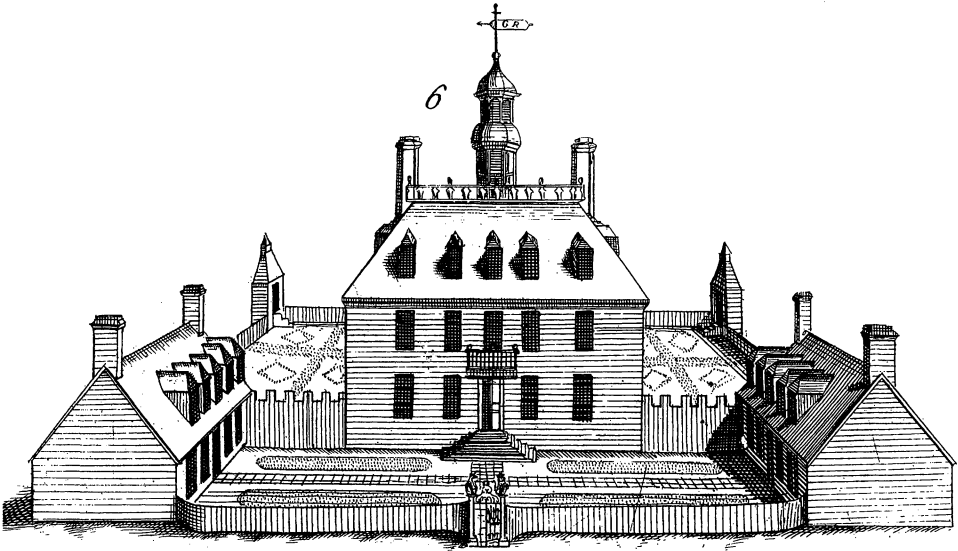
Detail of *Riflemen* by Jean-Baptiste-Antoine deVerger, watercolor (1781). The dress and accoutrements of this rifleman—or shirtman—probably from a backcountry or western Piedmont county, contrast sharply with those of the uniformed Washington (see p. 973) and were typical of the volunteers who turned out in the independent companies. The “independence” of such men pushed the gentlemen into creating a military establishment more in line with the traditional ideas of Washington.

Courtesy the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library. Photograph Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Visual Resources Library.

Nicholas, chairman of the Williamsburg Committee of Safety, who wrote that he had “no apprehension of the necessity or propriety of the proffered service.”²⁵

In a more telling instance, the newly enlarged independent company of Albemarle—one of those that joined with Henry and the other companies—had been told by the local gentry-dominated county committee (one of the extralegal bodies

²⁵ “Virginia Legislative Papers, 1774–1775,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 13 (July 1905), 49–50; James Parker to Charles Steuart, May 6, 1775, in “Letters from Virginia,” *Magazine of History*, 3 (March 1906), 158–59; James Madison to Bradford, May 9, 1775, in *Papers of James Madison*, ed. Hutchinson and Rachal, I, 144–45; Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 5. The preceding paragraph owes much to *ibid.*, 1–6. See also Michael Wallace to Gustavus Wallace, May 14, 1775, Wallace Family Papers (Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville); and Charles Yates to Samuel Martin, May 11, 1775, Charles Yates Letterbook, *ibid.*



Built between 1706 and 1720 in Williamsburg, the Governor's Palace, as it quickly came to be known, represented not just the coming-of-age of the colony but also a model for aspiring Virginia gentlemen to emulate. After Governor Dunmore took the gunpowder from the Williamsburg magazine, moderate gentlemen tried to intervene to stop volunteers from attacking and looting the palace. Eventually, Dunmore fled to greater safety on board a ship of war.

Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Visual Resources Library.

created to correspond with other counties and colonies and to enforce the 1774 boycott) to disband and not to march out of the county. But the company, meeting after receiving these instructions, noted the members were still "at a loss what to do." The company therefore voted, and the majority were in favor of marching to Williamsburg, which they proceeded to do. Two men, John Coles and David Rodes, both prominent county committee members, voted against the measure, "on which it was the opinion of the Comp'y that they ought to be drum'd out of the company, as an example of that kind, from people of such conspicuous characters in the County, might be of dangerous consequence." Significantly, the two men were later exonerated by the more conservative county committee. It was reported in June that, though the independent company from Spotsylvania County had acted under the direction of their elite-led county committee, "the *Caroline* company refused to enlist, unless they were to be solely under the direction of officers of their own choosing." There is some evidence, too, suggesting that some companies elected officers on each occasion of marching, further exacerbating the problem of control.²⁶

²⁶ Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, 177. See also *ibid.*, 71–72n. Proceedings of the Independent Company of Volunteers, [April 29, 1775], Diary and Memoranda of Gilmer; "Report of the Committee to inquire into the causes of the late disturbances." John Coles and David Rodes were wealthy; in 1782 Coles owned 5,000 acres and 64 slaves, Rodes 568 acres and 22 slaves. Albemarle County Personal Property Tax Records, 1782; Albemarle County Land Tax Records, 1782.

As imperial tensions mounted throughout June, volunteer companies marched to Williamsburg from nearby counties and set up camp on the edge of town. Their presence there, particularly their lack of discipline and of deference to civil authority, would force the gentry to reevaluate Virginia's military establishment. Arriving under the authority of their respective county committees or merely their elected commanding officers, the soldiers at Williamsburg quickly made a nuisance of themselves. Thomas Jefferson was told that the elected commanding officer of the volunteers, a Captain Scott, though his "goodness and merit is great, fear[s] to offend, and by that many members are rather disorderly."²⁷ What the gentry feared was the lack of a clear chain of command with centralized control. If a commander could be replaced by the vote of his men and military actions decided by majority vote, there could be no discipline and no control over what these troops might do.

A dramatic demonstration of this problem was not long in coming. Lacking clear direction and other duties, the volunteers at Williamsburg went on the offense. Believing any delay "would be dangerous, and tend to defeat our purposes," the officers decided to "wait on" the receiver general, other collectors of taxes, and naval officers to procure and protect public monies from leaving the colony. Should these royal officials refuse to comply, the volunteers were to bring them to camp to explain themselves. When the officers of the independent companies finally wrote to the then-convened Third Virginia Convention on July 26, 1775, for approval, they were rebuked. The proceedings of the officers, the gentry-dominated convention resolved, "though they arose from the best Motives, cannot be approved," and they were thus "required to desist from carrying their Resolutions into Execution."²⁸

In the eyes of the gentry, particularly the moderate Patriots, the independent actions of the volunteer companies threatened political and social stability because they were increasingly responsible for pushing Britain and Virginia further down the road to open conflict. Governor Dunmore had initially reacted to news of the marches of the independent companies by appealing for reinforcements from General Gage and Adm. Samuel Graves in Boston. He also made clearer and more public his threat to arm the slaves to spread "Devastation wherever I can reach," further inflaming Virginians, especially propertied moderate Virginians. Finally, after repeated incidents involving independent companies in Williamsburg, Dunmore fled from the town to an awaiting vessel, abandoning conciliatory efforts, he said, because his "house was kept in continual Alarm and threatened every Night with an Assault."²⁹ With Dunmore's flight, the possibility of reconciliation became even more remote.

But equally important, as the independent companies helped radicalize resistance

²⁷ Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 47–48; Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, 218–19; Gilmer to Jefferson, [July 26–27, 1775], in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, I, 237; "Meeting of Officers at Williamsburg," July 18, 1775, in "Papers, Political and Military, . . . of George Gilmer," ed. Brock, 92–93.

²⁸ Officers of the Volunteer Independent Companies at Williamsburg to the Convention, July 26, 1775, in "Papers, Political and Military, . . . of George Gilmer," ed. Brock, 98–99; Peyton Randolph to the Officers at Williamsburg, July 28, 1775, *ibid.*, 107–8. On the companies' actions, see *ibid.*, 90–107; Officers at Williamsburg to the Convention, Aug. 1, 1775, *ibid.*, 109; and Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, 401. For a similar incident, see *ibid.*, 417–18.

²⁹ See Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 4–5, 42–43.

externally, against Britain, they also began pushing for a stricter accounting of allegiances internally, polarizing the conflict within Virginia. Most often, they called for everyone to show patriotism by joining the independent companies and by ostracizing those who were slow in displaying their allegiance or approval. Not only were those who were “backward” in their “Attendance” with the independent companies often compelled to do service with the threat of “Tar & Feathers” and other “popular Terrors” including “*Scoff and Shame*” but others who tried to avoid service altogether were also threatened. Many merchants around the colony who wished to remain neutral had apparently been “called upon” by volunteer companies “to enlist as Soldiers therein, under pain of incurring the Displeasure of the Said Company, and of being treated as Enemies to the Country.” These were political acts and directly anticipated the struggles of the lower sort in Philadelphia later that summer to make the militia compulsory for all in that Quaker-dominated colony. Those who joined the equivalent of the independent companies in Philadelphia complained that they were of the “poorer Sorts of People whose public spirit far exceed their abilities in point of Fortune”; it particularly bothered them that a “vast number of Substantial Inhabitants” were “sitting at their ease & bearing no part in the Expence or Labour of the Association.”³⁰

Indeed, to the gentry in Virginia, perhaps the most horrifying manifestation of the volunteer companies’ newfound independence was the leveling entailed by increased attacks on neutral or unsympathetic individuals, particularly propertied ones. In such instances, volunteers recognized no socioeconomic barriers, a situation further exacerbated by the sometimes fine line between conservative patriotism and loyalism. Thus men as prominent as William Byrd and Robert Munford could no longer feel safe. Byrd, worried about the direction resistance to Britain was taking, complained that he was “often threatened with Visits from the valiant Volunteers of some of the neighbouring Counties.” He believed he had received “many insults” and given “great offence” because he would not offer his services in the military. Munford’s play *The Patriots*, written a year or two later, in 1776 or 1777, bitterly satirized the zealous patriotism of his less wealthy neighbors.³¹

The movement, in the eyes of the gentlemen, was becoming unwieldy, dangerous, and potentially subversive. The gentry felt that their control over the “ebullition of patriotism” (as one of Henry’s supporters put it) was slipping. Armed bands of men were taking the law into their own hands and radicalizing the resistance movement. Ultimately, the gentry feared the social chaos that might accompany open and uncontrolled warfare. As early as the summer of 1774, one Virginian pointed out to the wealthy the danger of resistance: “even a slight commotion may expose part of

³⁰ June 8, 1775, entry in *Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal, 1775–1776*, ed. Albion and Dodson, 25, 34; petition of Charles Duncan, [Aug. 9, 1775], in *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, ed. Scribner, 410, 412; Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class*, 54. See also Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, 490–91.

³¹ William Byrd to Ralph Wormeley, Oct. 4, 1775, Wormeley Family Papers (Alderman Library); Byrd to Sir Jeffery Amherst, July 30, 1775, in *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684–1776*, ed. Marion Tinling (2 vols., Charlottesville, 1977), II, 812; Robert Munford to Byrd, April 20, 1775, *ibid.*, 806. See Courtlandt Canby, ed., “Robert Munford’s *The Patriots*,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 6 (July 1949), 437–503.



The Alternative of Williamsburg, by Philip Dawe, London (1775). This shows armed patriots forcing gentlemen-merchants to sign the commercial "Association" against imports.

The "alternative" was to suffer the degradation of being tarred and feathered with the materials hanging from the scaffold. Such scenes of social mixing and conflict, particularly ones in which armed men compelled their supposed "betters" with threats and violence, horrified not only Englishmen like Dawe, but also many of the leading gentry in Virginia.

Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Visual Resources Library.

your wealth to the ravages of the populace, or the plunder of a licentious army." Peyton Randolph had earlier written to the Fredericksburg volunteers warning that "violent measures may produce effects, which God only knows the consequence of." Similarly, in the aftermath of Patrick Henry's march on Williamsburg, James Madison explained that "The Gentlemen below [on the York and James rivers] whose property will be exposed in case of a civil war in this Colony were extremely alarmed." Even the House of Burgesses confessed the great "difficulty there is in restraining an incensed multitude."³² The situation, of course, was exacerbated by the presence of slaves and indentured and convict servants, many of whom saw the coming "civil war" as an opportunity to gain their personal "independence."³³

The gentry were also fearful of the perceived and real erosion of deference inherent in the new volunteer companies and the loss of their authority and control over the dynamic and fluid situation. An army of citizen-soldiers was to some a worrisome prospect, for it held out the possibility of wholesale social changes. Distinctions between armed men were difficult to maintain, and deference would be the first casualty of war. One Mr. Gully, in the Northern Neck of Virginia, for example, refused to accept his position as a drill sergeant, much to Landon Carter's disgust: "the rascal calls himself Adjutant and insisted he would be so." As Rhys Isaac has noted, in the heady summer of 1775, "social distance was inevitably reduced, special advantages derived from cosmopolitan education were diminished, and distinctions of rank were rendered less sharp."³⁴

Thus, when the Third Virginia Convention—the extralegal substitute for the suspended House of Burgesses—met in July and August 1775, many of the leading gentry had already decided to abolish or "melt down" all the independent companies into a new and orderly military establishment. Many gentlemen believed that the independent companies "aim[ed] at too much" and that their "wild irregular sallies" needed to be checked. One gentry-dominated local committee had complained that "disorderly behaviour" had ensued as a result of their independent company's "assuming an authority independent of any Military Controul by Law established." As the historian John Selby has written, in the interim between the dissolution of the last House of Burgesses and the governor's fleeing to safety offshore, "the worst fears of moderates seemed about to come to pass; the leadership could scarcely retain control."³⁵

³² [Thomson Mason], "The British American, VII," *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), July 14, 1774, in *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, vol. I: *Forming Thunderclouds and the First Convention, 1763–1774*, ed. Robert L. Scribner (Charlottesville, 1973), 184. See also a revealing exchange of letters, first published in May and June 1775, *ibid.*, III, 117, 180–82, 199–200. For Peyton Randolph's statement, see Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 3. James Madison to Bradford, May 9, 1775, in *Papers of James Madison*, ed. Hutchinson and Rachal, I, 145. The House of Burgesses, responding to Dunmore's charge that it had given "countenance" to the "violent and disorderly proceedings of the people" when the magazine was rifled, told the governor the burgesses would never have given "countenance to such unjustifiable proceedings as happened that day" and that several gentlemen had tried to restrain the mob. See "Report of the Committee to inquire into the causes of the late disturbances."

³³ See, for example, Peter H. Wood, "The Dream Deferred: Black Freedom Struggles on the Eve of White Independence," in *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. Gary Okihiro (Amherst, 1986), 161–87; and Holton, *Forced Founders*, chap. 5.

³⁴ July 22, 1775, entry in *The Diary of Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752–1778*, ed. Jack P. Greene (2 vols., Charlottesville, 1965), II, 925–26; Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution," 383.

³⁵ George Mason to Martin Cockburn, July 24, 1775, in *Papers of George Mason*, ed. Rutland, I, 241; Louisa County Committee Proceedings, Dec. 4, 1775, in *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon and Hunter), Dec. 23, 1775; Chester-

The answer to the problems inherent in the independent companies, the gentry believed, was the minutemen. Hoping to channel the manifest enthusiasm for the cause among the yeomanry, the gentry-dominated Third Virginia Convention called for 8,000 men (almost one-fifth of the colony's eligible fighting males) who would train for twenty days immediately and frequently thereafter. This force would be the backbone of the new military establishment, ready and trained to fight on short notice.³⁶ It was also believed that the ranks would be filled with those who had already shown a disposition to fight, particularly the common farmer, or the middling sort—men “in whose Hands the Sword may be safely trusted”—rather than the lower sort, those deemed economically expendable, who usually fought the wars of the eighteenth century. George Gilmer also hoped the new military establishment would “be on such footing as inevitably to draw in Gent'n of the first property in the Colony.”³⁷

But, because the gentry established the minute service in reaction to the disorder engendered by the independent companies, they imposed conditions that ignored the popular will and clashed with the more voluntaristic, egalitarian, and democratic principles that had underpinned the success of those companies. Thus, prescribed terms of service were introduced that compelled men to train and serve for longer periods of time than in the independent companies. New rules and regulations for the governance of forces in the field imposed strict discipline on the troops. Subordination would henceforth be enforced, and an elaborate hierarchy within the military was resurrected, all to come under the central direction of the Committee of Safety in Williamsburg. Most seriously, the new rules ended once and for all the popular election of officers of any rank.³⁸ The minute service was, in effect, a conservative reaction—perhaps a counterrevolution—to the disorder of the egalitarian and uncontrollable independent companies. The “enthusiasm” of the volunteer companies was to be restrained and moderated in the new military establishment by the introduction of proper principles of hierarchy, command, subordination, and discipline.

field County Committee Memorial, [before July 1775], in *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, ed. Scribner, 339; Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 47. On the “independence” of the companies and the fears of the gentry, see McDonnell, “Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia,” chap. 1.

³⁶ A compulsory militia service was resurrected, and a few “regulars” ordered raised. The regulars were to be stationed in Virginia for the time being, but they were too few to provide fully for the colony's defense, and it was expected that they would be called north. Similarly, though measures were taken to revive the militia, it was expected to be called on only in emergencies; otherwise it would be a reserve pool of men for the regular and minute services. Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 51–52; William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (1809–1823; 13 vols., Charlottesville, 1969), IX, 9–48. On the Continental Army and its impact on the Virginia military establishment, see Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763–1789* (New York, 1971), 81–95.

³⁷ Mason to George Washington, Oct. 14, 1775, in *Papers of George Mason*, ed. Rutland, I, 255–56; Mason to Cockburn, Aug. 22, 1775, *ibid.*, 251; Gilmer to Charles Carter, July 15, 1775, Diary and Memoranda of Gilmer. On eighteenth-century warfare and expectations of service, see Reginald C. Stuart, *War and American Thought: From the Revolution to the Monroe Doctrine* (Kent, 1982), xiii–xv; Shy, *People Numerous and Armed*, 277–80; and Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution* (New York, 1982), 297–98.

³⁸ Hening, ed., *Statutes*, IX, 9–53.

Thus, while the gentry wished the ranks of the minute service to be filled with the same men who expressed enthusiasm for the cause through the independent companies, they changed the terms upon which those companies were founded. Although the gentry saw no contradiction in this new organization, the common farmer firmly and soundly rejected the new terms. By all accounts, the minute service failed miserably. Lund Washington, cousin of George Washington, declared that “our minute Scheme does not Equal the Conventions Expectation. the people do not come readily into it.” The Northampton County Committee of Safety complained of difficulties in completing the minute companies, “people in general being averse to the minute service.” A contemporary from Fredericksburg noted on October 20, 1775, that “the Officers of The Minute men are much behind and by all accots will not be able to get the full compliment of men,” adding that only “one district” out of fifteen was “compleated.” Fielding Lewis augmented this report a month later: “Virginia is in the greatest confusion, only one Battalion of Minute Men compleat, and little prospect of the others being so. . . . Spotsylvania has her Men compleat, Caroline not one Company & the lower County[ies?] scarce a Company.” Archibald Cary reported from his home in Ampthill in Chesterfield County on October 31, 1775, that his battalion of minutemen was “not Yet Compleat,” though he had been given command of them, and he concluded gloomily: “I fear but few Battalions of Minute Men will be rais’d.”³⁹ A little later, Robert Honyman, a physician from Hanover County, reflected in his diary that the “people disliked the plan, & there never was more than half of them raised.”⁴⁰

The reasons for the failure of the minute service were many, but Gilmer aptly summed them up in the extraordinarily explicit speech he made in the fall of 1775 with which this essay began. In his address, Gilmer took note of all the complaints

³⁹ Lund Washington to George Washington, Dec. 3, 1775, in *Papers of George Washington*, ed. Abbot et al., II, 479; Northampton County Committee of Safety to the Continental Congress, Nov. 17, 1775, in “Virginia Legislative Papers,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 14 (Jan. 1907), 253; Robert L. Scribner and Brent Tarter, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, vol. IV: *The Committee of Safety and the Balance of Forces, 1775* (Charlottesville, 1978), 246; Lewis to George Washington, Nov. 14, 1775, in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 53 (Jan. 1929), 93; Archibald Cary to Jefferson, Oct. 31, 1775, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, I, 249. See also John Page to the chairman of the Lancaster District Committee, Nov. 4, 1775, Sabine Hall Papers (Alderman Library). When companies were raised, it was often slowly and incompletely. See “Proceedings of the Committees of Safety of Caroline and Southampton Counties, Virginia, 1774–1776,” *Virginia State Library Bulletin*, 17 (Nov. 1929), 148–49, 153–55; “Proceedings of the Committees of Safety of Cumberland and Isle of Wight Counties, Virginia, 1775–1776,” in Virginia State Library Board, *Fifteenth Annual Report* (Richmond, 1919), 21, 24–27, 32, 33, 39.

⁴⁰ Robert Honyman Diary, Jan. 2, 1776, microfilm f.1 (Alderman Library). See also *ibid.*, March 17, 1776, f. 26. His comments are borne out by statistics. Of the 160 companies of minutemen ordered raised by the Third Virginia Convention in July 1775, no more than three-fourths seem to have been raised. One list shows 129 companies on the record books (through requests for provisions, pay, or orders given out to them) between 1775 and the end of 1776, but it is not clear whether those companies were raised at all or raised in full. Culpeper district, for example, touted as having the largest of the minute battalions with 14 companies on the books, was able to muster only about 350 men to march to Williamsburg in fall 1775, half the number that 14 companies should have been able to supply. In the crucial initial period before the end of October, at most 49 companies formed, according to the list, and only another 19 from November to December. The rest formed after the military crisis of fall 1775 and after the Fourth Virginia Convention, when the delegates, responding to popular pressure, abolished battalion duty, stripping the minute service of any real distinction from the militia. Hening, ed., *Statutes*, IX, 86–88; E. M. Sanchez-Saavedra, *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations in the American Revolution* (Richmond, 1978); Sanchez-Saavedra, “All Fine Fellows and Well-Armed,” 4–6.

he had heard about the service among his neighbors and attempted to counter each in order to raise enthusiasm for the minute plan. In doing so, he allowed us a rare and revealing glimpse of the views of the normally “inarticulate” common farmer in Virginia, which, with the evidence of white Virginians’ earlier enthusiasm for the independent companies and similar complaints later in the conflict, provides a clear portrait of small farmers’ grievances and demands at the start of the war. What emerges quickly and clearly from Gilmer’s speech is a picture of a Virginia deeply divided—between those dictating the terms upon which the colony would fight and those expected to bear the brunt of those terms.

In any voluntary call for manpower, inequality will prevail. Military service is a regressive form of taxation as everyone must make the same sacrifice, regardless of wealth. Though the minuteman plan called for “only” twenty days’ initial training, small farmers generally found this difficult to manage. In addition to the initial training, companies were supposed to get together for four days every month (except December, January, and February, to avoid bad weather) and twice a year in their district battalions for twelve successive days. They would train for a total of eighty days the first year and sixty days in later years. In return, the minutemen were to receive a modest pay, but only for the time they were out for training or in service. Most small farmers felt, in the words of Gilmer, that the service was “a heavy duty.”⁴¹

Those were long periods to be away from farms. But the burden was far less for the policy-making wealthy planter with many slaves and overseers who could labor in his absence than it was for the small farmer. Despite popular images of Virginia as a “slave society,” the bulk of the people were not generally slave owners, or owned one or two slaves at most. One recent study concludes that a “majority of the whites stood outside of the slave system at the time of the Revolution.”⁴² For many slaveholding planters, time away from the estate meant at worst lost profits; for small farmers with no help—whose “Corporeal Labours [were] necessary to sustain their families”—the basic subsistence of the family was at risk. Hence many ordinary Virginians were particularly affected by calls for them to leave their farms for a duration. Petitioners from Chesterfield County in 1776 were explicit about who would be most hurt by military service: “the poorer sort who have not a slave to labour for them.” Later in the war, one militia unit put the case succinctly: “We generally procure a sustenance for our Selves and families by the labour of our own hands and one days Labour is Necessary for the Next days support.” Moreover, the initial call for enlistments in the minute service began at the end of August and continued through September and October—the second busiest time of the year for tobacco-growing farmers. Small farmers would have none of it. The “One great Objection” of the inhabitants of Accomack County to the minute service, it was reported, “Arises from

⁴¹ Hening, ed., *Statutes*, IX, 20–21; Gilmer, “Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle,” 122–23, 125, 127.

⁴² Richard S. Dunn, “Black Society in the Chesapeake, 1776–1810,” in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville, 1983), 67. For an attempt to make sense of the sketchy data about the number of slaveholding families at the time of the Revolution, see Main, “Distribution of Property in Post-Revolutionary Virginia,” 248–49.

the time of Encampment being such that it must unavoidably break in upon their whole years Business."⁴³

Yet it was less the military service that small farmers objected to than the attendant training. If enrolled in the minute service, farmers had to attend training or risk being fined. Most small farmers believed that such training was unnecessary and more than "a little burthensome," particularly once they had learned the "most essential parts" of soldiering. Gilmer believed that his neighbors thought that the "military anticks & ceremonies [were] altogether useless."⁴⁴ Small farmers wanted, in the words of northern Virginians protesting the new military establishment, to "go and Fight the Battle at once, and not be Shilly Shally, in this way, until all the Poor, people are ruined." Indeed, small farmers were willing to fight, just as they had in the independent companies. Membership in a volunteer company called for little training or extra duty, at least none that was not voluntary. The independent companies were so popular because they required service only when it was absolutely and evidently necessary. The feelings of the Fluvanna County militia, expressed later in the war, were typical. Called out for mere guard duty in the middle of a harvest, they complained of the "extreme inconvenience" they suffered under and promised if they were discharged at this time, "they will more chearfully attend when there may be more necessity for them." Subsequent events would prove them true to their word, as throughout the war, ordinary Virginians did turn out to defend the shores of the Old Dominion, but usually as "volunteers."⁴⁵

Economically grounded complaints, though serious, are not enough to explain the refusal of small farmers to participate as minutemen. There was something odious about service in the new military establishment, whether in the minutemen, militia, or regular army, which stood in marked contrast to conditions in the independent companies. What the farmers especially objected to was having to make sacrifices on the gentry's terms, embodied in the rules and regulations for the minute service. Small farmers particularly resented training that consisted of "learning" discipline, subordination, and "respect" for now-appointed officers. Moreover, they were being asked to do this and to pay the price of this unfair taxation even as gen-

⁴³ For the statement about "Corporeal Labours," see James Innes to Jefferson, Feb. 21, 1781, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, IV, 675. For similar complaints that the minute service took men from their farms, see "Virginia Legislative Papers," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 17 (Oct. 1909), 381; and "Virginia Legislative Papers," *ibid.*, 18 (Jan. 1910), 26–27. Petition from Chesterfield County, in Proceedings of the Fifth Virginia Convention, May 7, 1776, in *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, vol. VII: *Independence and the Fifth Convention, 1776*, ed. Brent Tarter (Charlottesville, 1983), 47; Rockbridge County Petition, [June 14, 1781] (Virginia State Library); Hening, ed., *Statutes*, IX, 20–21; Accomack County Committee of Safety to the Fourth Virginia Convention, Nov. 30, 1775, in "Virginia Legislative Papers," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 14 (Jan. 1907), 258. On the labor needed for tobacco growing, see Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, *Robert Coles' World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 59.

⁴⁴ Petition from Chesterfield County, 47; George Gilmer, "Address to the Albemarle County Independent Company," [April 18, 1775], in *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, ed. Scribner, 50–51.

⁴⁵ Lund Washington to George Washington, Feb. 29, 1776, in *Papers of George Washington*, ed. Abbot et al., III, 396. On the northern Virginians' protest, see Woody Holton and Michael McDonnell, "The Loudoun County Uprising and the Revolution in Virginia," typescript, 1997 (in Michael McDonnell's possession). William Henry to Theodorick Bland, June 17, 1779, Bland Family Papers (Virginia Historical Society). For a sample of the times when many small farmers turned out to fight, see McDonnell, "Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia," chap. 7, esp. 246–49.

tlemen did not enlist and exemptions from service benefited the wealthy. Gilmer addressed many of the complaints raised against the minute service, but he usually dismissed them as frivolous. Those complaints, however, are key to understanding the mentality of the small farmer during the revolutionary crisis. Dissatisfaction with the conditions and terms of military service was and continued to be a paramount factor in limiting small farmers' desire and willingness to fight.

In the first place, small farmers wanted the burden of service equally distributed through all ranks of society, with no exceptions. It was one thing to take time away to fight, but it was another to do so while wealthier neighbors stayed at home. Small farmers' commitment to a more equal distribution of military service, first evidenced in the independent companies' demand that reluctant gentlemen and others join them in the common defense, can be seen in a related protest. At the time when they refused to join the minutemen, small farmers also remonstrated against the exemption from military service, particularly in the now-compulsory militia, granted to overseers: a move designed to restore order and control on larger plantations where slaves were agitating for their own independence, but one that directly benefited wealthy plantation owners to the disadvantage of the less wealthy. Small farmers from Lunenburg County felt that many wealthy slaveholders "are become Overseers that otherways wou'd not, on purpose to Secure themselves from Fighting in defence of their Country as well as their own property." Militia from Amelia County felt that those who had been exempted were not only "Strong healthy able bodied Men" but "Many of them [were] possessed of Considerable Property in Lands and Slaves." Class differences were prevalent in the complaints of militia units from Lunenburg and Mecklenburg counties:

Many of your Petitioners are poor men with families that are Incapable of Support[ng] [th]emselves without Our labour & Assistance and we look up[on] it to be extremely hard & no ways [equatable or Just] that we Should be Obliged to leave our Farms [in such a Situation] that if ever we Shou'd return again Wou'd find our Wives & Children dispers'd up & down the Country abeking, or at home aSlaving, and at the same time quite unable to help them to the Necessaries of life while the Overseers are living in ease & Affluence.

The petitioners' words indicate, not a reluctance to fight, but a sensitivity to the fairness of the terms on which they would fight.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hening, ed., *Statutes*, IX, 28, 31, 89; "Petition of Amelia County Militiamen," [May 23, 1776], in *Revolutionary Virginia*, VII, ed. Tarter, 236. For evidence of a similar petition from Chesterfield County, see *ibid.*, 87. Proceedings of the Fifth Virginia Convention, June 4, 1776, *ibid.*, 349; "Petition of Inhabitants of Lunenburg County," [April 26, 1776], *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, vol. VI: *The Time for Decision, 1776*, ed. Robert L. Scribner (Charlottesville, 1981), 474–77. The missing words were supplied by a similarly worded petition from Mecklenburg County, May 13, 1776, *Revolutionary Virginia*, VII, ed. Tarter, 114–15. On the struggle over exemptions of overseers, see Allan Kulikoff, "The American Revolution, Capitalism, and the Formation of the Yeoman Classes," in *Beyond the American Revolution*, ed. Young, 80–119. Some planters abused that exemption. Robert Carter asked the colonel of the militia of Westmoreland County to take Robert Mitchell off the list of militiamen required to muster as Carter was designating him as an overseer (although Mitchell had entered Carter's estate as a clerk and steward). Robert Carter to John A. Washington, Nov. 23, 1775, Robert Carter Letterbooks, vol. 3, Robert Carter Papers (Foundation Library, Colonial Williamsburg).

Small farmers were further chagrined at the exemptions granted to foreigners, especially merchants. The Third Virginia Convention, reacting to the spirited activities of the independent companies and anxious not to alienate a vocal, wealthy, and influential segment of society, recommended that all natives of Great Britain residing in the colony be treated with "lenity and friendship" and be exempted from military service. Small farmers reacted vehemently. By marking out a moderate line, the convention hoped to smooth over prevailing dissension, but the recommendation had the opposite effect. Dale Benson, in his study of committee actions in 1775–1776, notes that after the convention's resolution urging leniency and military exemptions for foreigners, "reports of renewed persecutions of Scottish merchants surfaced." Robert Honyman reported that the move was "generally disapproved of by the people, & served to aggravate their ill will towards foreigners." The inhabitants of Lunenburg County contended that the measure had "greatly increased" any "jealousies and distinctions" that had existed before and asked that a test be instituted to distinguish the friends of America from her foes. Such grievances continued to be voiced and acted upon throughout the war. Surges of violent anti-Tory actions coincided with greater manpower demands, and they usually came from below.⁴⁷

Discontent with the minute service was capped by the perception that many of even the Patriot gentry were not serving. Fielding Lewis reported that the minute service was failing because of "the young Gentlemen not setting a good example of inlisting." This impression exacerbated complaints by smaller farmers and led to protests that the minute service was "calculated to exempt the gentlemen and throw the whole burthen on the poor." Others said that instead the "men of Fortune should bear the whole weight of the war." Such concerns seemed to be endemic throughout the war. Indeed, even by the end of 1776, it had become a commonplace "objection which many with us have of entering the service . . . that as the Danger of War approaches, men of Fortune refuse to afford that assistance, which is expected from them." Such a perception continued to plague the war effort and helped precipitate an incipient rebellion in the Northern Neck as aggrieved militia complained "that the Rich wanted the Poor to fight for them, to defend there property, whilst they refused to fight for themselves."⁴⁸

Within the minute service, small farmers were equally irritated by the belief that when the gentry did take part in the new military service, it was invariably as appointed officers. Gilmer took note that many "declare the Gentlemen have more at stake and ought to fight to protect it, but that none enter the service but as offi-

⁴⁷ Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, III, 490–92, 497; Benson, "Wealth and Power in Virginia," 246; Honyman Diary, Jan. 2, 1776, f. 2–3; Robert L. Scribner and Brent Tarter, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, vol. V: *The Clash of Arms and the Fourth Convention, 1775–1776* (Charlottesville, 1979), 157. See also *ibid.*, IV, 72–73, 142. On the timing of anti-Tory actions, see, for example, a petition from Caroline County, submitted during the militia call-outs to counter the 1781 British invasion, in *The Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton, 1734–1803*, ed. David John Mays (2 vols., Charlottesville, 1967), I, 363–65.

⁴⁸ Lewis to George Washington, Nov. 14, 1775, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 53 (Jan. 1929), 93; Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 122–23; "Virginia Legislative Papers," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 18 (Jan. 1910), 29–31; "Proceedings of a General Court Martial held in Leeds Town," June 18, 1781, *Executive Papers* (Virginia State Library).

cers,” they being, it was said, “fond of officer’s places.” The gentry, frightened by the potential and real leveling in the independent companies, had reverted back to the traditional hierarchical military establishment with its attendant social role, which was, as Rhys Isaac has demonstrated, “suffused with the sense that society is a ranked system of dignity, honor, and obligation.” In that establishment persons of high standing served as commissioned officers, or not at all. Now that rules and regulations had been imposed and rigid discipline was expected, many of the gentry refused to “submit” to “standing in the ranks as common soldiers” as they had in the independent companies. The view of Francis Willis of Frederick County seems typical. In July 1775 he wrote to Robert Carter that he had “no objection to my Sons Henrys entring into the Service in the lowest as an Officer, from his own Behaviour then would depend his being advanced.” However, he asserted, “I am absolutely in the strongest Terms against his enlisting as a common Soldier.”⁴⁹

To reestablish and reinforce that social role, the Virginia convention scrapped the election of officers by the rank and file, replacing it by appointments based on recommendations made by the county committees (which were generally dominated by the counties’ old ruling oligarchies). Convention members did so as part of their counterrevolution against the anarchy of the independent companies officered by elected men. Not only did Virginia repudiate a factor that had clearly contributed to the success of the earlier mobilization but it was almost alone among the colonies in eliminating popular elections of officers, at least at the company-grade level. Even in neighboring Maryland, the convention in December 1774 had called for the reorganization of the old militia and the election of new officers. The Virginia gentry, however, frightened by the example set by the independent companies, returned to the carefully delineated and controlled world of the prerevolutionary militia.⁵⁰

When the gentry began to resurrect the old-style militia along with the minutemen, there had been enough opposition that at least one county committee pleaded with its citizens to “suppress every animosity among yourselves; pay obedience to Officers properly appointed; let no Discontents on Account of their Advancement interrupt the necessary Preparation; let Harmony dwell amongst you.” The situation only worsened when the gentry finally and thoroughly repudiated the election of officers in plans for the minutemen. One report in fall 1775, amid the poor recruiting for the minute service, noted that the “Continental Spirit” was still present, but was “retarded by internal Divisions concerning the Mode of appointing Officers.”⁵¹

Complaints about the appointment of officers in the minuteman service had reached such a pitch that Gilmer, who had been appointed captain of a company from Albemarle, told his neighbors that he was “ready and willing to submit to the

⁴⁹ Gilmer, “Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle,” 122, 124; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 105; Francis Willis to Robert Carter, July 19, 1775, Carter Family Papers (Virginia Historical Society).

⁵⁰ Robert L. Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, vol. II: *The Breaking Storm and the Third Convention* (Charlottesville, 1975), 374–75. On elections of officers in other colonies, see David J. Toscano, “A Shift in Strategy: The Organization of Military Struggle,” in *Resistance, Politics, and the American Struggle for Independence, 1765–1775*, ed. Walter H. Conser Jr. et al. (Boulder, 1986), 426, 430.

⁵¹ “Proceedings of the Committees of Safety of Cumberland and Isle of Wight Counties,” 15–16; Nov. 19–20, 1775, entries in *Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal, 1775–1776*, ed. Albion and Dodson, 133–34.

determination of such as are or intend to become minute men, whether I shall continue Captain or become a common soldier." Intended to rouse popular enthusiasm and to counter criticism, Gilmer's willingness to make this concession to the disgruntled is significant. Gilmer may not have been unique in responding to his neighbors' complaints and resistance. After internal struggles over the appointment of minuteman officers, the Cumberland County Committee, when asked by the Fifth Virginia Convention to send minutemen reinforcements and to "appoint . . . proper Officers" to lead them, allowed their minutemen to "have the Liberty of chusing" which captain they would serve under of the three appointed, and "their Choice" was to become the "Sense" of the committee. Official policy, however, remained the same and contributed greatly to the "backwardness" of military service after summer 1775. When a new county was created in summer 1777, the state government made its position clear: "The Idea of the people having a Right to elect the Militia Officers is totally inadmissable." In the fall of 1775, however, ordinary Virginians expressed their anger over the end of formal elections of officers by staying out of the minutemen.⁵²

Finally, the fact that the gentry would serve only if they served as officers was particularly galling in light of the reintroduction of "distinctions" in the service by way of increased pay for officers. *Nobody* had been paid in the independent companies, but in the new military establishment, everyone was paid on a graded, hierarchical scale. In the minute service, for example, privates were to get a shilling and a quarter per day when in service, whereas their captains were to receive six shillings and their colonels fifteen shillings per day. Many complained of this difference. When the minutemen were first established, small farmers in Loudoun County had complained about the officers' wages "being too high." When a full-scale riot broke out in February 1776, protesters in that county then argued that "the pay of officers and Soldiers should be the same, or what would be still better they should not be paid at all, there is no inducement for a poor Man to Fight, for he has nothing to defend." Gilmer's neighbors similarly desired "no pay at all or officers," and even the chairman of the Sussex County Committee had to defend himself publicly before his own committee for expressing "his disapprobation of some . . . of the proceedings of the late convention held at Richmond, particularly in regard to the wages of the officers of the intended forces to be raised." Those complaints reflected a social vision that was far more egalitarian than the gentry's.⁵³

The issue of pay was inextricably tied to the desire of ordinary Virginians to fight unrestrained by hierarchical distinctions and control. Immediately after noting the complaints about the pay structure, Gilmer asserted that his neighbors were desirous of "all marching *promiscuously* and on *equal* footing as volunteers." Ultimately, small

⁵² Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 123–24, 125; Tarter, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, VII, 88; "Proceedings of the Committees of Safety of Cumberland and Isle of Wight Counties," 37; H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the Council of the State of Virginia, 1776–1788* (4 vols., Richmond, 1931–1967), I, 491.

⁵³ Hening, *Statutes*, IX, 9–10, 21–23; Leven Powell to Sally Powell, Dec. 5, 1775, photocopy (Virginia Historical Society). I would like to thank Woody Holton for this reference. Lund Washington to George Washington, Feb. 29, 1776, in *Papers of George Washington*, ed. Abbot et al., III, 395–96; Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 126; Scribner and Tarter, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia*, IV, 142.

farmers wanted to fight on the same terms as they had in the independent companies of only a few months before, when equality was at least an ideal, and men marched alongside their supposed superiors for no pay, but for patriotism. Gilmer could not understand the nature of his neighbors' complaints. When they protested that the new service was calculated to exempt the "gentlemen" at the expense of the poor, Gilmer also looked to the past to counter them: "Did we not all indiscriminately mix together as Volunteers; was there ever any partiality or distinction shewn?"⁵⁴ Yet if the freeholders and inhabitants of Albemarle agreed with him on this point, there was an obvious question: Why must there be partiality and distinctions in the new service?

Gentlemen took a different view. They considered a wide pay disparity vital to the maintenance of hierarchy and thus of discipline. "Such as have been already in the service," Gilmer explained, "must know that without some distinction there can be no subordination." Near the end of his address he beseeched his neighbours to "pray [that] all would determine to be subordinate to those in command. Without it, no discipline can be observed; 'tis the life of an army." George Washington later argued that decent pay for officers was needed to preserve a distance between an officer and his men. If the officer was in no way distinguished, his men would "consider and treat him as an equal; and . . . regard him no more than a broomstick, being mixed together as one common herd; [thus] no order, nor no discipline can prevail." Charles Lee, a former British army officer, made the connection between pay and "distinctions" more explicit. Petitioning Congress for an increase in officers' pay, he explained: "men who chuse to preserve the decent distance of officers, must have a decent subsistence, and without this distance no authority or respect can be expected." He then ordered his officers to "be particular in not associating with the Soldiers so far as to let them Make use of Familiarity." The contrast between the ideal of equality celebrated in the independent companies a few short months before—the "indiscriminate mixing"—and the inequality now demanded in the new military establishment could not have been clearer to small farmers.⁵⁵

The pay issue was clearly interwoven with the gentry's attempts to reassert control and authority over the revolutionary movement when they could no longer take that command for granted. Indeed, Gilmer and others' emphasis on the need for discipline, subordination, and hierarchy is yet another sign of the dual purpose of the minute service.⁵⁶ The gentry desired an army composed of men different from the members of the mercenary body that they opposed, yet a desire to maintain social order and a reliance on traditional means of fighting meant that discipline and distinctions in rank were absolutely vital to the war effort and ultimately, they felt, to the integrity of Virginia society. Ostensibly arguing that discipline was necessary

⁵⁴ Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 122, 126 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 126, 128; George Washington to the president of Congress, Sept. 24, 1776, in *Writings of George Washington*, ed. Fitzpatrick, VI, 108–9, 110; Charles Lee to Benjamin Rush, Oct. 10, [1775], *Lee Papers*, I, 212; "The Orderly Book of the Company of Captain George Stubblefield, Fifth Virginia Regiment," Virginia Historical Society, *Collections*, new series, 6 (1887), 159.

⁵⁶ Posturing and claims to superiority were given a new lease on life in the military forces, but the middling sort had become sensitized to such behavior. See Greene, *Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities*, 200–201.

to military success, the gentry and, in this instance, Gilmer also saw the need for social control over the armed forces. Gilmer's choice of the word "promiscuously" suggests the lurking fear behind gentlemen's attempt to reestablish a clear hierarchy of command and discipline.

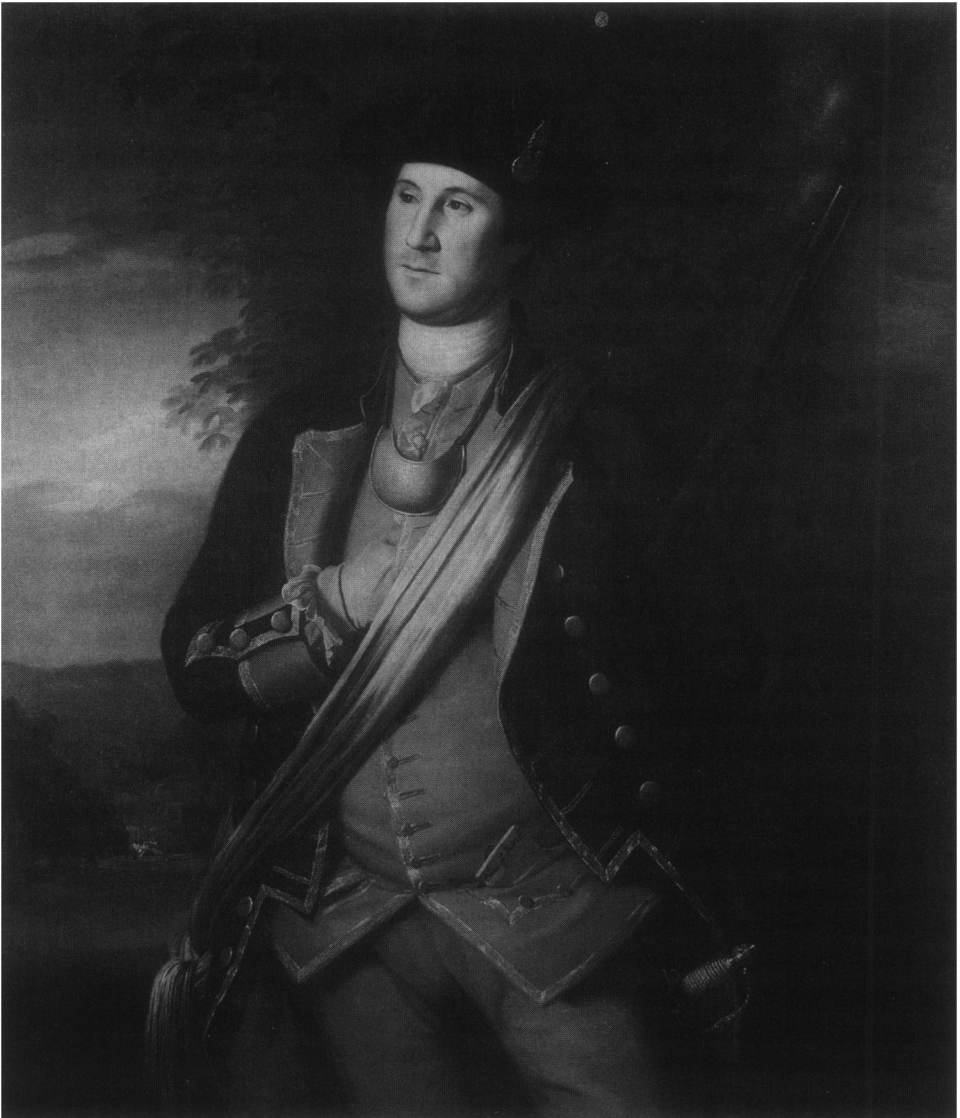
The contest over military service and the complaints about the minute service, then, reflected wider social issues. Though explicitly military concerns seem to be at the forefront of most of the gentry's efforts to reform the armed services, implicit concerns for the social order clearly influenced the way they reorganized the military establishment. And the reaction of small farmers, particularly in staying out of the new forces, reinforced an internal and implicit challenge. Efforts to mobilize the population and the people's subsequent response indicate what both sides expected, or at least hoped, from the process.

Though the gentry went into the conflict hoping that deference would secure their authority, they quickly turned to a greater reliance on law and coercion to maintain control. When the conflict began, the gentry fell back on a wish that deference would be sufficient to rouse popular enthusiasm and to keep it under control. Thus they had hoped in the independent companies to "infuse a martial spirit of emulation" and to "excite others by our Example," and in other military matters, they hoped for ordinary Virginians' "implicit acquiescence and Concurrence," as Cumberland officials put it, in whatever was recommended. And, as Gilmer noted with regard to the minutemen, the gentry wanted and expected ordinary Virginians to "sacrifice their own ease and interests to their country's welfare."⁵⁷ The gentry, however, wanted them to make sacrifices on imposed terms, especially after they saw the consequences of uncontrolled and unchecked militarism in the independent companies. When appeals to public virtue and deference failed to keep small farmers in check, the gentry tried to reimpose their authority through a traditional military establishment that reasserted the primacy of raw power.

George Gilmer first invoked a deferential argument to justify the need for distinctions for officers in the form of higher pay, asking whether "a thinking, considerate soldier suffer a man who he admires, whose commands animate him to action, to be no ways distinguished?" Yet when officers were no longer elected by the men, "admiration" was hardly the glue that bonded or "wedded" "thinking men" to their "superiors." Rather, Gilmer betrayed the mentality that prevailed among the gentry in a curious metaphor that must have infuriated numbers of his neighbors: "since time immemorial every head or chief has had marks of distinction and certain emoluments above those under him. The Custom is so prevalent with ourselves that every planter allows his Gang leader certain indulgences and emoluments above the rest of his slaves."⁵⁸ Gilmer could not have introduced a more inappropriate analogy, particularly in a colony in which approximately 40 percent of the population were enslaved, providing small farmers with a constant reminder of what they were *not* supposed to be.

⁵⁷ Mason, "Fairfax County Militia Association," 210; Mason, "Remarks on Annual Elections for the Fairfax Independent Company," 229; "Proceedings of the Committees of Safety of Cumberland and Isle of Wight Counties," 16–17; Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 122–23, 125, 127.

⁵⁸ Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 126.



George Washington in the Uniform of a British Colonial Colonel by Charles Willson Peale, oil (1772). Painted after Washington's service as an officer in the provincial army during the French and Indian War but before he took command of the Continental army, this portrait is indicative of Washington's early pretensions to gentility and support for a traditional hierarchical military establishment. Washington's views may have been shaped by his experiences with insubordinate and independent backcountry volunteers during that war.

Courtesy Washington-Custis-Lee Collection, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia.

It was precisely the inequality, subordination, dependence, and involuntary service inherent in slavery that farmers were rallying against in the military. Small farmers refused to comply, refused to act deferentially, particularly when asked to make unequal sacrifices. They would serve, but not out of deference to what the gentry wanted, and only if they could do it on their own terms. George Washington himself perhaps best summed up the problems in the clash of cultures between the gentry and yeomanry. Remonstrating against the idea of raising "volunteers" in Virginia a little later in the war, Washington claimed that "Those who engage in Arms under that denomination . . . are uneasy, impatient of Command, ungovernable; and, claiming to themselves a sort of superior merit, generally assume, not only the Privilege of thinking, but to do as they please." In their demands for no differences in pay, or no pay at all, the inhabitants of Albemarle, Loudoun, and other counties demanded just that. They demanded, not just the "Privilege" but the *right* "of thinking" and, while making sacrifices, of doing "as they please."⁵⁹

Thus, the response to efforts to recruit for the minute service demonstrated that resistance to gentry military policy was not over the objectives of mobilization—resistance to Britain—but over the means to that end. Implicit in the resistance was a firm challenge to the gentry's "revolutionary" vision, which was informed by a deferential and hierarchical political culture. Albert H. Tillson Jr. has written about an "alternative popular political culture" in the upper valley of Virginia, or the backcountry. As made manifest in the military organization of the community, such a culture emphasized a "preference for less hierarchical, more consensual styles of leadership." We can now begin to see a similar "alternative culture" among the small farmers of Tidewater and Piedmont Virginia. Military preparations in 1775 and the subsequent history of wartime mobilization reveal a coherent pattern in small farmers' expectations and demands. They too wished for less hierarchy and subordination and more democratic, or at least consensual, modes of organization. Moreover, small farmers consistently demonstrated their commitment to "fare play," as one irate Piedmont carpenter-farmer later put it—not only equality within the service but also a fair distribution of the burden of service through all ranks of society. If these demands were not met, ordinary Virginians could simply refuse to serve, as they did in the minutemen, forcing the gentry to recognize that they could not take unquestioning and deferential popular support for granted.⁶⁰

The failure of the minutemen in Virginia had important consequences, both in the military short run and the political long run. Militarily, the refusal of small farmers to enter into the minute service in the expected numbers left the colony defenseless,

⁵⁹ George Washington to Patrick Henry, April 13, 1777, in *Writings of George Washington*, ed. Fitzpatrick, VII, 407–9.

⁶⁰ Tillson, "Militia and Popular Political Culture in the Upper Valley of Virginia," 306. See also Tillson, *Gentry and Common Folk*, chaps. 3–5. The comment about "fare play" was made in the heat of an incident over the apprehension of a deserter. "Information," Oct. 6, 1777, box 1, 1770s–, Suit Papers, Cumberland County Court Records (Virginia State Library).

threatened, and in the “greatest confusion” at the very moment when Governor Dunmore launched his counteroffensive in the Hampton Roads and Norfolk region and officially proclaimed all slaves who would join with him against their masters free. In a panic, the gentry effectively scrapped the minuteman plan in the December 1775 convention and instead asked Congress to accept and pay for six more battalions of regular full-time troops. Indeed, contrary to the idea that the minute service was scrapped *because* of the need for more regular troops to meet Washington’s demands farther north, the gentry pleaded with Congress to authorize and to pay for more regular troops because the minutemen had failed to attract sufficient citizen-soldiers to defend the colony. The new professional troops raised were not sent north; they were stationed around the frontiers of Virginia, in a defensive posture with full-time pay. Thus they were literally to take the place of the minutemen but were paid by Congress and composed of the “lower sort” who would serve full time and for regular pay.⁶¹

The gentry thus abandoned the ideological ideal of the citizen-soldier and turned to a more traditional force of paid professional troops, and to a more traditional pool of people—the “poor, the unemployed, and the unlucky,” the young, men “who could best be spared, and will be most serviceable,” or, in the words of one of the gentry, “those Lazy fellows who lurk about and are pests to Society”—offering economic incentives in return for disciplined and obeisant service. The gentry turned to the same kind of men they had relied on to do the fighting in the unpopular French and Indian War in an effort to keep the politically active middling sort out of the conflict. Thus small farmers’ refusal to act as the gentry asked at a critical moment in the war shaped the contours of Virginia’s military policy for the duration of the war.⁶²

Subsequently, even the lower sort were able to resist and manipulate gentry efforts to prosecute the war with their labor. Persistent and violent resistance to attempts to raise a full-time regular army also forced leaders to adopt destructive inflationary measures and seriously frustrated mobilization. Indeed, until the war moved south in 1780–1781, the gentry had to rely mainly on large bounties and material inducements to get men to serve in the army. Such policies contributed immeasurably to the horrendous inflation that plagued Virginia’s wartime economy. At the height of their inflationary problems, in 1779, Edmund Pendleton reported that the men enlisted in the army had cost “on an Average of £5000, each, besides the public

⁶¹ Lewis to George Washington, Nov. 14, 1775, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 53 (Jan. 1929), 93; Hening, ed., *Statutes*, IX, 86, 89, 139; Scribner and Tarter, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia*, V, 190–91. On the struggle over the addition of Virginia’s new troops to the Continental establishment, the situation in Virginia in fall 1775, and Dunmore’s proclamation, see Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 58–79; and John Robert Sellers, “The Virginia Continental Line, 1775–1780” (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1968), 54–63.

⁶² Titus, *Old Dominion at War*, 45; Hening, *Statutes*, IX, 275–80; Edmund Pendleton to William Woodford, June 28, 1777, in *Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton*, ed. Mays, I, 215; John Chilton to his brother [Charles Chilton?], Aug. 11, 1777, in Keith Family of Woodburn, Fauquier County, Papers (Virginia Historical Society); Honyman Diary, Aug. 29, 1777, ff. 154–56. Studies of recruits from 1776 and later in the war confirm this pattern. See Richard C. Bush, “‘Awake, Rouse Your Courage, Americans Brave’: Companies Raised in Northumberland County for the Virginia Continental Line, 1776 and 1777,” *Bulletin of the Northumberland County Historical Society*, 29 (1992), 7–10; John Van Atta, “Conscription in Revolutionary Virginia: The Case of Culpeper County, 1780–1781,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 92 (July 1984), 279; and Joseph A. Goldenberg et al., “Revolutionary Ranks: An Analysis of the Chesterfield Supplement,” *ibid.*, 87 (April 1979), 182–89.

bounty of a hogshead of tobacco." This was, he concluded, "a sum which at any rate of depreciation must exceed the ability of any Countrey frequently to repeat."⁶³ The gentry thus paid a high price to keep the middling sort out of the war.

In the military crises of 1780 and 1781, when the Virginia Assembly was forced to implement a more universal draft policy that targeted the middling as well as the lower sort, resistance to military service—on the gentry's terms—once again became widespread. Pressure from below thoroughly disabled enforced mobilization in 1780 and 1781. Draft laws collapsed under the weight of "violent and riotous" behavior and the threat thereof, although ordinary Virginians again turned out as volunteers in more local skirmishes when necessary. Against mandatory laws Virginians reacted with evasive and resistance tactics; Friedrich, baron von Steuben, summed the situation up in disgust: "The opposition made to the law in some counties, the entire neglect of it in others, and an unhappy disposition to evade the fair execution of it in all afford a very melancholy prospect."⁶⁴

As Steuben's comments indicate, such opposition also contributed to a growing localism. The extent and violence of protests was often mitigated by local officials' refusal fully to execute state laws. Recognizing that they would provoke confrontation if they carried out the laws, many local officials chose to ignore, evade, or adapt state laws when they felt it was in the interest of the community at the county level. Thus local county institutions and officials gained in authority at the expense of the state government, and an incipient sense of localism was strengthened.

Problems over mobilization, however, also politicized small farmers. The farmers' frustration spilled over into other, more political realms. Called upon to make sacrifices for the Patriot cause, ordinary Virginians demanded a say in how that cause should be run. At the very least, the new military establishment caused bad feelings between the gentry and middling farmers. In his efforts to recruit for the minute service, Gilmer had labored under "censure and illiberal abuse" and was subject to "ungenteel reflections" and "infamous aspersions." More seriously, Gilmer thought that efforts were being made among his neighbors to "delude the populace, to raise factions, or establish parties." A worried Gilmer told his neighbors that if they did not like the minuteman plan, they should not resist it but get the laws changed. The convention, he reminded them, was the only method they had "of getting the voice of the people," and thus "if your delegates should proceed in a manner that you think unjustifiable, take care to elect better men." There is evidence that small farmers did exactly that.⁶⁵

Even before the next elections for convention members, small farmers got an opportunity to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the revolutionary government and its manpower policy. Elections for the county committees of safety, previously unregulated, were set for November 1775.⁶⁶ During the elections, other issues con-

⁶³ Pendleton to James Madison, Sept. 25, 1779, in *Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton*, ed. Mays, I, 308–9.

⁶⁴ "Representation of the State of the Virginia Line," enclosure in Friedrich, baron von Steuben, to Jefferson, May 28, 1781, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd, VI, 31.

⁶⁵ Gilmer, "Address of George Gilmer to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 115, 121–22.

⁶⁶ The Third Virginia Convention had provided that "freeholders" who were entitled to vote for burgesses were eligible to elect "annually twenty-one of the most discreet, fit, and able men" to serve as a committee. Hening, ed., *Statutes*, IX, 53–60; Scribner and Tarter, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia*, IV, 206.

tributed to discontent, such as salt shortages, British depredations, and pressure on tenants, but military policy was foremost in the minds of small farmers. The result was upheaval. One leading scholar of the committees, Dale Benson, concludes that in counties for which data are available, “the local elite suffered a deflation of its authority even though it retained absolute power.” In most county committee elections in November 1775, Benson asserts, “planters who were dropped [from their previous positions on the committees] were of prominent families and possessed large estates while those who were added were middling planters whose social pedigree was mediocre or non-existent.”⁶⁷

Ordinary Virginians’ politicization in the independent companies and the protest against the minutemen also help explain the popularity of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, which appeared shortly after the minuteman fiasco. Events in Virginia in 1775 may have created fertile soil for a pamphlet that urged not just independence from Britain but also the creation of a new and far more democratic government. Although Paine’s pamphlet was original, its fundamentals expressed what people were already thinking. The popular sovereignty and egalitarianism that small farmers in Virginia had called for in their military organization and in their protests over bearing the burden of the war were endorsed in Paine’s *Common Sense*, which did more than any other document to equate independence and republicanism in the minds of the American people. At the very least, most ordinary Virginians believed that independence would give them a greater role in affairs of state. Virginians reported *Common Sense* made a “great noise” and helped “subvert all Kingly Governments and erect an Independent Republic.” Even Landon Carter, who detested Paine’s pamphlet and was hesitant about independence, was forced to admit that “there is abundance talked about independency . . . it is all from Mr Common Sense.”⁶⁸

Such feelings found an outlet in April 1776, when an election was held for delegates to a new general convention, the first since the previous spring. Years later, Edmund Randolph recalled that the election of delegates for that convention, which ultimately decided on secession, “depended in very many, if not in a majority, of the counties upon the candidates pledging themselves . . . to sever . . . the colonies from Great Britain.” Many incumbents who refused to endorse independence were turned out. As the first results came in, Josiah Parker, a young convention member, recently appointed major in the Continental Army, wrote: “Our freeholders all Mad, determined to have a New house altogether.” Robert Brent, a Northern Neck planter, too noted the general turmoil in the election: “For many counties there has been warm contests for seats in our Approaching convention. Many new ones are got in.” Altogether, forty-eight seats, or 38.1 percent of the convention, changed from the fourth to the fifth meeting, the largest turnover in a Virginia legislature since 1758 (another wartime election). In a colony unused to contested elections and legislative turnover,

⁶⁷ Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 307–8; Benson, “Wealth and Power in Virginia,” 303–9.

⁶⁸ Jan. 22, 26, 1776, entries in *Journal of Nicholas Cresswell*, 136; March 12, 28, 1776, entries in *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, II, 999, 1006. On the impact of *Common Sense* in Virginia, see Holton and McDonnell, “Loudoun County Uprising.”

particularly in the run-up to rebellion, these results were significant, and they caused anxiety amongst the gentry.⁶⁹

Certainly, military issues were at the forefront of many of the contests. Landon Carter was disgusted to hear that one man was elected after he had exclaimed “agst the Patrolling law, because a poor man was made to pay for keeping a rich mans Slaves in order.” Another delegate “actually in a most seditious manner, resisted the draughting the Militia by lot, to be ready for any immediate local emergency; and he got first returned that way.” Echoing the concerns of such members of the gentry as Gilmer and Washington over the “independence” of the volunteers, Carter feared that the popular feeling was for an independence defined as “a form of Government, that by being independt of the rich men eve[r]y man would then be able to do as he pleasd”—an “independence,” he confided in his diary, “in which no Gentleman should have the least share.” It was with this “expectation,” he lamented, that “they sent the men they did, in hopes they would plan such a form.” It was this convention that instructed Virginia’s delegates in Congress to propose that the thirteen colonies declare independence and that began to frame a new, republican, government.⁷⁰

Yet the politics of mobilization did not end with independence. Persistent and widespread resistance to gentry policy not only shaped the contours of legislation introduced during the war years but also prompted ordinary Virginians to take their grievances to the polls. During the war years a high rate of legislative turnover, most often coinciding with unpopular mobilization policies, especially draft laws, continued to mark Virginia politics, as “the people interest themselves in Elections at this time more than ever.” By 1780, many gentry were complaining that the assembly was full of “men of mean abilities & no rank” or too many “ignorant or obscure” men and “factious bawling” fellows.⁷¹ Such changes in the assembly may explain why new mobilization laws weighed heavily on the wealthy, culminating in an attempt in late 1780, narrowly defeated, to take every twentieth slave from those owning twenty or more slaves, to offer as bounty for new recruits instead of instituting a draft. One legislator commented that the principle upon which the plan was proposed was that “Negroes were a desireable Property, and it would be obliging to the Wealthy, who perform little personal duty, to contribute largely.” Joseph Jones, an assembly delegate from King George County and James Monroe’s uncle, thought

⁶⁹ Edmund Randolph, *History of Virginia*, ed. Arthur H. Shaffer (Charlottesville, 1970), 234; Josiah Parker to Landon Carter, April 14, 1776, Sabine Hall Papers; Robert Brent to R. H. Lee, April 28, 1776, in *Lee Family Papers*, ed. Paul P. Hoffman (microfilm, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, 1966); Scribner, ed., *Revolutionary Virginia*, VI, 287–91. On the relatively quiet prerevolutionary elections, see John G. Kolp, “The Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Pre-Revolutionary Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 49 (Oct. 1992), 652–74.

⁷⁰ Landon Carter to George Washington, May 9, 1776, in *Papers of George Washington*, ed. Abbot et al., IV, 236–37, 240–41; May 1, 1776, entry in *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, II, 1031. For the suggestion that small farmers’ demand for independence, combined with the gentry’s fear of “disorders”—including those created by the independent companies and by resistance to the minutemen—pushed the gentry into this unforeseen decision, see Holton, *Forced Founders*, esp. part III.

⁷¹ Honyman Diary, April 15, July 4, 1780, ff. 395, 414; George Mason, “Remarks on the Proposed Bill for Regulating the Elections of the Members of the General Assembly,” [June 1, 1780], in *Papers of George Mason*, ed. Rutland, II, 629–31, 631–32n. On legislative turnover in the late war years and mobilization policy, see McDonnell, “Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia,” chap. 4.

that, though the scheme “bears hard upon those wealthy in Negroes,” it had a fighting chance in the assembly because “a great part of our House are not of that Class or own so few of them as not to come within the Law shod. it pass.” Though that plan was defeated, it was agreed that any new recruit would be given a land bounty and either £60 in specie or a slave upon the termination of his service—but not before the assembly debated an inflammatory proposal to make the wealthy alone pay for all monetary bounties given to new recruits.⁷²

Such legislative changes and their effect on wartime policy have often been overlooked because by the end of the war the composition of the assembly resembled that of the prewar legislature. But the turmoil of the war years might also help explain an anomaly in postwar state politics. It is generally recognized that, with few exceptions, the same men who governed colonial Virginia and dominated the legislature were also in charge in the postwar period.⁷³ If the war was so damaging to the political culture of the new state, why were the effects not immediately evident in the legislature? If ordinary Virginians were so thoroughly dissatisfied with the prosecution of the war and the gentry’s conception of the social order, why were so few leaders turned out of the legislature and kept out?

Part of the answer lies in another acknowledged but little understood change in Virginia politics in the postwar period. The prewar political consensus that had prevailed among elites vanished after the war. One recent study concludes that the “most striking thing about Virginia politics in the postwar period is that the harmony so characteristic of the prewar years is completely absent,” a contrast made all the “more arresting” because of the continuity of membership.⁷⁴ Postwar Virginia was a changed place, and gentlemen as well as the lower and middling sorts thought differently about the political culture in which they lived, at the local, state, and national levels.

The upheaval of the war years goes far in explaining this transformation. Because scholars have generally failed to recognize both the tremendous outburst of popular discontent in Virginia during the war and the nature of that discontent, they have overlooked the results of such discontent. Protest, defiance, and the turnover in the legislature in the midyears of the war, though temporary, not only opened up a traditionally closed sphere of politics to a wider range of men but also must have shaken the leading gentry’s confidence in the power of deference to secure votes. Postwar politics showed a move away from deferential politics and marked “the beginnings

⁷² Undated bill, Legislative Department, Rough Bills (Virginia State Library). I would like to thank Brent Tarter for this reference. Thomas Madison to William Preston, Nov. 30, 1780, Preston Papers (Virginia Historical Society); Joseph Jones to James Madison, Nov. 10, 18, 24, Dec. 2, 8, 1780, in *Papers of James Madison*, ed. Hutchinson and Rachal, II, 168, 182–83, 185, 198, 218–19, 232; Hening, ed., *Statutes*, X, 326–37; Journal of the House of Delegates, Nov. 10, 1780, Jan. 1781 (Virginia State Library).

⁷³ See, for example, Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*, 318; and Sloan and Onuf, “Politics, Culture, and the Revolution in Virginia,” 280. For contemporary comments on the return of elite dominance, see Pendleton to James Madison, April 16, 1781, in *Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton*, ed. Mays, I, 350, 350n2; and St. George Tucker to Bland, May 2, 1782, in *The Bland Papers: Being a Selection from the Manuscripts of Colonel Theodorick Bland, Jr.*, ed. Charles Campbell (2 vols., Petersburg, Va., 1840–1843), II, 79.

⁷⁴ Sloan and Onuf, “Politics, Culture, and the Revolution in Virginia,” 280.

of sustained conflict between legislative factions over public policy, and of issue-oriented appeals to constituents.⁷⁵

Though the long-term consequences of resistance are difficult to measure, a more responsive legislature may have been a result of the years of challenge during the Revolutionary War. The gentry learned valuable lessons about the expectations and demands of their less wealthy neighbors, and after the war they were far more responsive. They were less likely to put their self-defined interests above the concerns of their constituents. The gentry became far less reluctant to jeopardize provincial, even national, harmony and consensus for the sake of more local issues in the post-war period. If they had ignored the concerns of their neighbors before the war, they did so at their own peril afterward. Alfred F. Young has argued that the "ghosts" of Daniel Shays, Abraham Yates, and Thomas Paine were a radical presence in Philadelphia during the framing of the Constitution; so too the memory of small-farmer wartime resistance haunted Virginia's leaders during the early national period, reminding them where the limits of their authority truly rested.⁷⁶

Thus the apparently placidity of the revolutionary years in Virginia needs to be reassessed. Small farmers left an indelible mark on the course and direction of the revolutionary movement in Virginia that is not always apparent in the letters and diaries of the state's leading gentry. In Virginia, both the middling and lower sorts used the war in different ways, at different times, in different places, to make their voices heard, to manipulate gentry attitudes and policies and to change the patterns of social interaction and political culture in the new state subtly but profoundly. Though here the focus has been on the minuteman service and the middling sort, closer attention to the experiences of all Virginians during the war promises rich rewards, as similar effort does on the national front. Ultimately, the voices of those people whom elites lived with, listened to, and often struggled against must be recovered and thoroughly reexamined if we are to advance further our understanding of political and social relations in eighteenth-century Virginia and throughout the new republic.

Indeed, as historians have shown, all across the colonies and new states, internal conflict and social upheaval made resistance and rebellion a dual revolution, and

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 279. See also Norman K. Risjord, *Chesapeake Politics, 1781–1800* (New York, 1978); Norman K. Risjord, "How the 'Common Man' Voted in Jefferson's Virginia," in *America: The Middle Period; Essays in Honor of Bernard Mayo*, ed. John B. Boles (Charlottesville, 1973), 36–64; and Jackson T. Main, "Sections and Politics in Virginia, 1781–1787," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 12 (Jan. 1955), 96–112. See also Steven James Sarson, "Wealth, Poverty, and Labor in the Tobacco Plantation South: Prince George's County, Maryland, in the Early National Era" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998). Though it arrived too late for full consideration here, Sarson's thorough and thoughtful study promises to challenge historiographical paradigms concerning the yeoman farmer in the early republic and suggests that any gains made by ordinary Virginians during the Revolution may have been temporary or more ideological/cultural than social/economic.

⁷⁶ See Alfred F. Young, "The Framers of the Constitution and the 'Genius' of the People," *Radical History Review* (no. 42, 1988), 8–18. Popular upheaval may have had effects on Virginia's national leaders. For speculation on the consequences of anti-Federalist populism for political society in the early republic, see Saul Cornell, "Aristocracy Assailed: The Ideology of Backcountry Anti-Federalism," *Journal of American History*, 76 (March 1990), 1171–72. See also Ronald P. Formisano, "Teaching Shays / the Regulation: Historiographical Problems as Tools for Learning," *Common Sense* (no. 106, Winter 1998), 24–35; and Shy, *People Numerous and Armed*, 213–63. Shy offered suggestive thoughts on the postwar national legacy of the armed conflict, but his call for research on the impact and consequences of the war has still not been answered comprehensively.

never was this more apparent and dramatic than during the armed conflict itself. In all the colonies, the varied experiences of the middling and lower sorts in the military and their varied outcomes—not always positive—brought revolutionary change. The Minutemen of Massachusetts went to war to retain their traditional way of life and ended up transformed by participation in the war. In Pennsylvania the most radical gains were made, as the lower sort in Philadelphia were mobilized and politicized and used their new bargaining power to affect politics and constitution making. Militia in backcountry Pennsylvania, however, used the Revolution to protect and expand their family farms and to intensify a racially motivated war with neighboring Native Americans. Throughout the colonies and new states, many poorer or younger whites and blacks joined local forces or the Continental Army in the hope of securing a steady income or a propertied stake in the new republic, while broadening their social and political horizons.⁷⁷ Yet despite the labors of an expanding group of social-military historians, we still have much work to do in linking the wartime experience of ordinary Americans, men and women, black, white, and Native American, both in and out of the military, with the social and political developments of the period. Wherever the net has been cast so far, it is clear that while resistance and rebellion may have resulted in a war for independence, social conflict and internal upheaval made for a revolutionary war that profoundly changed American society.

⁷⁷ See Gross, *Minutemen and Their World*; Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class*; Knouff, “‘Arduous Service’”; and Edward C. Papenfuse and Gregory A. Stiverson, “General Smallwood’s Recruits: The Peacetime Career of the Revolutionary War Private,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 30 (Jan. 1973), 117–32.