

COMMENTARY: A summary of events in Culpeper before 1776

As Culpeper County prepares to celebrate the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776, perhaps it is timely to consider the significant events that took place in Culpeper before that momentous date. These events demonstrated Culpeper's early commitment to American's revolutionary ideals.

In March 1765, the Stamp Act was passed by the British Parliament to help pay for British troops stationed in the colonies during the Seven Years' War. The act required the colonists to pay a tax, represented by a stamp, on various forms of papers, documents and playing cards. It was a direct tax imposed by the British government without the approval of the colonial legislatures and was payable in hard-to-obtain British sterling, rather than colonial currency.

In protest, on Oct. 21, 1765, sixteen of the twenty members of the County Court of Culpeper, holding commissions as Justices of the Peace, resigned and relinquished their commissions.

Culpeper County is also where an early fight for religious freedom in America occurred. A native of Massachusetts, Baptist pastor John Leland was persecuted, arrested and imprisoned for preaching in Culpeper without permission from the Anglican Church authorities. This was followed by at least eleven other arrests of Baptist pastors by 1774.

Afterwards, in 1788, John Leland and James Madison met just outside Orange County on Fredericksburg Road and made an agreement that bore fruit in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Leland agreed not to oppose Madison's bid to be a delegate to the Constitutional Convention if Madison would promise to seek specific guarantees for religious liberty in amendments to the Constitution. One can go to that spot today and visit Leland-Madison Memorial Park.

By 1774, Virginians were halfway convinced for war against Britain. When news arrived in May that Britain was blockading the port of Boston, the Virginia House of Burgesses announced that June 1st would be a day of fasting and prayer.

In response, Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor, dissolved the legislature. The Burgesses reconvened at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg to organize a shipping embargo and to propose the first Continental Congress. They also scheduled the first Virginia Convention. The Convention was to meet August 1, 1774, to allow delegates an opportunity to obtain the opinions of their respective counties.

Several Virginia counties proceeded to draft "resolves" or resolutions asserting their rights while also proclaiming their loyalty to King George III in an often-conditional way. In response, on July 7, 1774, a committee of Culpeper County freeholders drafted the "Culpeper Resolves."

These Resolves, like the many other similar resolutions passed in county meetings throughout the colonies, summarized the feelings of Culpeper citizens in mid-1774. These were convictions that their constitutional rights were being violated by British policies. The Resolves also marked a step forward in intercolonial cooperation, as more Americans began to realize that a threat against one colony was a threat against all.

The 3rd Virginia Convention in July 1775 authorized a militia unit, the Culpeper Minute Battalion, to be organized. Recruitment and mustering of the 350-man unit began under a large oak tree at "Clayton's old field" (near present day Yowell Park).

Lawrence Taliaferro of Orange County was appointed colonel, Edward Stevens of Culpeper was appointed lieutenant colonel, and Thomas Marshall of Fauquier was appointed major. John Marshall, the fourth Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was a member of the original militia unit.

On December 29, 1775, Culpeper Minutemen participated in the Battle of Great Bridge, the first Revolutionary War battle on Virginia soil. This battle can be seen as the first strategically important colonial victory over the British. It led to Royal Governor Lord Dunmore's retreat to nearby Royal Navy ships and the elimination of British governance in Virginia.

The Culpeper Minute Battalion was disbanded in 1776, but many men continued to serve in the Continental Line and other militia units. Many Culpeper men served during the 1781 Virginia campaign, which culminated with the American victory at Yorktown.

Culpeper resident Andrew W. Gutowski, a registered architect, is vice chair of the town of Culpeper's Architectural Review Board; a member of the Museum of Culpeper History's board of directors; and a management member of Friends of Culpeper Battlefields.

Culpeper resident Jim Bish is an author and member of the Museum of Culpeper History's board of directors.



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