

“LORD DUNMORE’S ETHIOPIAN REGIMENT”

“This measure of emancipating the negroes
has excited an universal ferment.”

William Eddis, Annapolis, January 16, 1776

In American patriotic tradition the first full-fledged villain to step from the wings as the Revolutionary War unfolded was John Murray, Earl of Dunmore.¹ Like other royal governors in office as the crisis reached its height, the crown’s representative in Virginia would have been a marked man no matter how circumspect his behavior. Dunmore, lacking in diplomatic skills, was destined to furnish the colonists with a convenient hate-symbol. The act for which he incurred the greatest infamy was one which in Negro circles cast him in the role of liberator. This was Dunmore’s proclamation inviting slaves to leave their masters and join the royal forces.

Issued as of November 7, 1775, on board the *William* in the harbor at Norfolk, the proclamation announced that in order to defeat “treasonable purposes” the Governor was declaring martial law. Colonists who refused “to resort to his Majesty’s standard” were to be adjudged traitors. Then came the words which were destined to be quoted far and wide: “and I do hereby further declare all indented servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty’s Troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing the Colony to a proper sense of their duty, to His Majesty’s crown and dignity.”²

1. The following chapter is adapted from an article of mine appearing in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 15 (October, 1958), 494-507.

2. Original broadside, in University of Virginia library. For a facsimile which Patrick Henry circulated, and which differs a little in punctuation from the original, see Francis L. Berkeley, Jr., *Dunmore’s Proclamation of*

Dunmore's proclamation had its expected effect. "The colonists," wrote a contemporary, "were struck with horror"; the "Poet of the American Revolution" implored the heavens to deliver the colonies from the "valiant" Dunmore and "his crew of banditti" ("who plunder Virginians at Williamsburg city").³ Taking alarm, the Continental Congress on December 2, 1775, instructed its committee for fitting out armed vessels to engage ships of war to capture or destroy the Governor's fleet, and General Washington was urged to take such measures against his lordship as would "effectually Repel his violences and secure the peace and safety of that Colony." Two days later the Congress recommended to Virginia that she resist Dunmore to the utmost.⁴

The apprehension over Dunmore's proclamation was grounded initially in the fear of its unsettling effect on the slaves, but ultimately in the fear of a servile insurrection—that nightmarish dread in communities where the whites were outnumbered. A policy that would strike off their shackles would obviously have a marked appeal to the inhabitants of slave row. Moreover, there had been recent evidence that the Virginia bondmen were responsive to the offer of freedom.

Emancipation (Charlottesville, 1941), frontispiece. See also *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., III, 1385.

3. Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution*, I, 234; Fred Lewis Pattee, ed., *The Poems of Philip Freneau*, 3 vols. (Princeton, 1902-07), I, 140. "Hell itself could not have vomitted anything more black than this design of emancipating our slaves," wrote a Philadelphia correspondent to a friend abroad. *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Jan. 20, 1776, quoted in Margaret W. Willard, ed., *Letters on the American Revolution, 1774-1776* (Boston, 1925), 233. It was the judgment of Edward Rutledge that the proclamation tended "more effectually to work an eternal separation between Great Britain and the Colonies,—than any other expedient, which could possibly have been thought of." Rutledge to Ralph Izard, Dec. 8, 1775, in A. I. Deas, ed., *Correspondence of Mr. Ralph Izard*, 2 vols. (New York, 1844), I, 165.

4. Ford, ed., *Journ. of Cont. Cong.*, III, 395, 403; John Hancock to George Washington, Dec. 2, 1775, Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 8 vols. (Washington, 1921-36), I, 267. The army commander shared the apprehension of Congress. "If," he wrote to a Virginia delegate, "that man is not crushed before spring, he will become the most formidable enemy America has; his strength will increase as a snow ball by rolling: and faster, if some expedient cannot be hit upon, to convince the slaves and servants of the impotency of his designs." George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, Dec. 26, 1775, in R. H. Lee, *Memoir of the Life of Richard Henry Lee* (Philadelphia, 1825), II, 9. Compare Washington to Joseph Reed, Dec. 15, 1775, in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of Washington*, IV, 176.

Dunmore himself had furnished such evidence. For at least eight months prior to the formal proclamation, the Governor had seriously considered the idea of enlisting the slaves. His reasons were plain. Rebellious planters who contemplated a resort to arms would be deprived of their workers and would be compelled to return to their homes to protect their families and their property. Moreover, the slaves would help fill the ranks of military laborers for His Majesty's forces. Such human *potential de guerre* was badly needed, since Dunmore could expect little help from British headquarters in Boston.⁵ Raising the slaves against their masters was such an obvious tactic that from the beginning the crown supporters and their sympathizers had contemplated inciting disaffection among Negroes in the South.⁶

Dunmore let it be known late in April 1775 that he might be driven to set up the royal standard, adding that if he did, he believed that he could count "all the Slaves on the side of Government."⁷ On May 1 the Governor wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth expressing confidence that, once supplied with arms and ammunition, he would be able "to collect from among the *Indians*, negroes and other persons" a force sufficient to cope with the Virginia patriots.⁸ Two weeks later, Gage in a letter to Dartmouth touched

5. General Thomas Gage wrote to Dunmore on Sept. 10, 1775: "I can neither assist you with Men, arms or ammunition, for I have them not to spare; should you draw upon me I have not the Cash to pay your Bills." Sir Henry Clinton Papers, Clements Lib. Hereafter cited as Clinton Papers. For England's continuing great difficulty in getting manpower see Edward E. Curtis, *The Organization of the British Army in the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1926), 51-80.

6. "Although Virginia and Maryland are both very populous," wrote Governor Josiah Martin of North Carolina to Dartmouth on June 30, 1775, "the Whites are greatly outnumbered by the Negroes, at least in the former; a circumstance that would facilitate exceedingly the Reduction of those Colonies who are very sensible of their Weakness arising from it." Clinton Papers.

7. "Deposition of Dr. William Pasteur. In Regard to the Removal of Powder from the Williamsburg Magazine," in "Virginia Legislative Papers (from originals in Virginia State Archives)," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 13 (July 1905), 49.

8. Dartmouth to Dunmore, Aug. 2, 1775, *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., III, 6. In this passage Dartmouth repeats the contents of a letter from Dunmore dated May 1. Later that year Dunmore concocted a plan to raise the tribes, as Gage phrased it, "on the back Parts of the Province of Virginia, to be joined by such inhabitants and Indians as may be at, and about Detroit." Gage to Guy Carleton, Sept. 11, 1775, Gage Manuscripts, American Ser., Clements Lib. This so-called "Connolly Plot" is briefly described in Isaac S. Harrell, *Loyalism in Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1926), 35-37.

on Dunmore's proposal: "We hear," wrote the British commander, "that a Declaration his Lordship has made, of proclaiming all the Negroes free, who should join him, has Startled the Insurgents."⁹

In late April a group of slaves, scenting freedom in the air, went to the Governor's house and volunteered their services. Not quite ready for an open break with the patriots, Dunmore had them dismissed. But a decision could not be long delayed. On June 8, 1775, the Governor took the decisive step of quitting Williamsburg and taking asylum aboard the man-of-war *Fowey* at Yorktown, a move he had been turning over in his mind since May 15. "I have thought it best for his Majesty's Service," he wrote, "to retire from amidst such hostile appearances around me." The House of Burgesses, taking note of the Governor's flight, assured him that his personal safety was in no danger, but pointedly noted its displeasure that "a Scheme, the most diabolical, had been meditated, and generally recommended, by a Person of great influence, to offer Freedom to our Slaves, and turn them against their Masters."¹⁰

Realizing that there was no turning back, but not as yet willing to declare his policy, Dunmore seized any means at hand to add black reinforcements to his tiny force of 300 white soldiers, seamen, and loyalist recruits. In early August the officers of the volunteer companies in Williamsburg informed the Convention that the "Governour's Cutter had carried off a number of Slaves belonging to private gentlemen."¹¹ Small sloops, which the Crown employed primarily to intercept intracolony shipments of powder, invited slaves aboard. "Lord Dunmore sails up and down the river," wrote a Norfolk correspondent on October 28, 1775, to a friend in England, "and where he finds a defenceless place, he lands, plunders the plantation and carries off the negroes."¹²

9. Gage to Dartmouth, May 15, 1775, Gage MSS, English Ser., Clements Lib.

10. "Deposition of John Randolph in Regard to the Removal of the Powder," in "Virginia Legislative Papers," *Va. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, 15 (Oct. 1907), 150; Dunmore to Gage, May 15, 1775, Gage MSS, American Ser., Clements Lib.; John Pendleton Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1773-1776* (Richmond, 1905), 256.

11. "Proceedings of the Virginia Convention, August 3, 1775," *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., III, 373.

12. *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Dec. 22, 1775, quoted in Willard, ed., *Letters on the American Revolution*, 271-72. The number of

Ready at last to come out into the open, Dunmore was concerned only with his timing. An apparently auspicious moment came in mid-November 1775, when a skirmish took place at Kemp's Landing on the Elizabeth River. In this action the colonial militia was routed and its two commanding colonels were captured. Entering the village in triumph, Dunmore, on November 14, ordered the publication of the proclamation he had drafted a week earlier on board the *William*. The final break had come—the Governor had set up his standard and had officially called upon the slaves to join him.

Tidewater Virginia took alarm as rumors spread that slaves were stampeding to the British.¹³ However the stampede, if it occurred, did not go very far. Before any substantial slave migration to Dunmore could get under way, the Governor suffered a decisive defeat at arms. This occurred on December 9 at Great Bridge, a fortified span across the Elizabeth River some ten miles below Norfolk which dominated the land approach to the town. Dunmore had believed an attack was impending and had rashly decided to take the offensive. His force of 600 was severely repulsed, suffering 61 casualties, including 3 dead officers. Forced to retreat after twenty-five minutes of combat, Dunmore's troops hurried back to Norfolk. Feeling that he could no longer hold the city and fearing a retaliatory attack, the Governor spiked his twenty pieces of cannon and ordered his followers aboard the vessels in the harbor. He was never to regain a foothold on the Virginia mainland.

The military preparation of the colonists was matched by their promptness in adopting "home front" measures to prevent slaves from joining the Governor. Newspapers lost no time in publishing the proclamation in full, as information and as a warning. To deter runaways, local patrols were doubled, highways were carefully watched, and owners of small craft were required to exercise vigilance. Since Dunmore's action had come as no surprise, the Virginians had had time to put

slaves reaching Dunmore before he issued his proclamation is indeterminate; "some accounts make them about 100; others less." Edmund Pendleton and others to Virginia Delegates in Congress, Nov. 11, 1775, Lee Family Manuscripts, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville.

13. "Letters mention that slaves flock to him in abundance, but I hope it magnified." Edmund Pendleton to Richard Henry Lee, Nov. 27, 1775, *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., IV, 202.

the colony in a "tolerable state of defense."¹⁴ Adjacent Maryland, through its Council of Safety, ordered a military force to station itself in St. Mary's County "and guard the shores from thence to the river Powtownmack, to prevent any servants, negroes, or others from going on board the Fowey ship of war."¹⁵

To vigilance the colonists added psychological warfare. The *Virginia Gazette* published a letter from a subscriber urging that Negroes be warned against joining Dunmore. Slaves should be told that the English ministry, in refusing to stop the slave trade, had proved a far greater enemy to Negroes than their American masters, and that if the colonists were defeated, their slaves would be sold in the West Indies. They should be told, too, that Dunmore was cruel to his own black servitors. And, finally, slaves should be urged to place their expectation on a better condition in the next world. If this information had been spread widely, the correspondent observed, "not one slave would have joined our enemies."¹⁶

A week later the *Gazette* carried another letter in similar vein. Colonists were advised to inform slaves that Dunmore proposed to free only those who would bear arms for him, leaving the aged and infirm, the women and children, to bear the brunt of the shorn master's anger. Moreover, under the English flag the slaves would be much worse off than under Virginia masters, "who pity their conditions, who wish in general to make it as easy and comfortable as possible, and who would willingly, were it in their power, or were they permitted, not only prevent any more negroes from losing their freedom, but restore it to such as have already unhappily lost it." Contrast this benevolent disposition with that of British masters, the *Gazette* warned, who would sell the runaways to the sugar islands. "Be not then, ye negroes, tempted by this proclamation to ruin your selves."¹⁷

Official action was not long in coming. The Virginia Convention on December 8 appointed a committee to prepare an

14. Ramsay, *American Revolution*, I, 234.

15. Journal and Correspondence of the Maryland Council of Safety, Aug. 29, 1775, to July 6, 1776; William H. Browne, et al., eds., *Archives of Maryland* (Baltimore, 1883—in progress), XI, 511-12. Hereafter cited as *Arch. of Md.*

16. *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), Nov. 17, 1775. Hereafter cited as *Va. Gaz.*

17. *Ibid.*, Nov. 24, 1775.

answer to Dunmore's proclamation. Five days later, when the committee made its report, it was directed to draw up a declaration stating that runaways to the British would be pardoned if they returned in ten days; otherwise they would "be liable to such punishment as shall be directed by the Convention." The following day, with the committee's report at hand, the delegates issued a declaration of policy. Beginning with a reminder that the time-honored penalty for a slave insurrection was death without benefit of clergy, the document stated that Negroes who had been "seduced" to take up arms were liable to punishment. But in order that they might return in safety to their duties, they would be pardoned if they laid down their arms forthwith. The proclamation concluded with a request to "all humane and benevolent persons in the colony" to convey to the slaves this "offer of mercy." To insure a wide circulation, the proclamation was published as a broadside.¹⁸

The Virginians supplemented techniques of persuasion and sweet reasonableness with means forthright and punitive. In early December the Convention decreed that slaves taken in arms were to be sold to the foreign West Indies; the sale money, minus expenses, was to go to their masters.¹⁹ Somewhat less severe was the fate of captured runaways who had failed in attempts to reach the king's forces. Such slaves, if their masters were patriots, were merely returned to their home plantations, often after serving a term of imprisonment, although their masters might be ordered to "convey them to some interior part of the Country as soon as may be."²⁰ Slaves of British sympathizers were put to work in the lead mines,²¹ a practice which became customary in Virginia for the duration of the war. Distrusting all Negroes who had joined the Gov-

18. *Proceedings of the Convention of the Delegates in the Colony of Virginia* (Richmond, 1816), 63; *Virginia Broadside*, LIV, Univ. Va. Lib.

19. Hening, ed., *Statutes of Va.*, IX, 106.

20. Such was the language used by the Virginia Council to William Kirby (July 12, 1776) concerning his slave, Frank. H. R. McIlwaine and Wilmer L. Hall, eds., *Journals of the Council of State of Virginia*, 3 vols. (Richmond, 1931-32, 1952), I, 67.

21. On Dec. 14, 1775, the Convention ordered the Committee of Safety to employ captive slaves "in working the Lead Mine in the County of Fincastle, for the Use of this Colony," *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., IV, 85. Shortly afterward four would-be followers of Dunmore who were captured at Accomac were ordered "sent up the country and employed in some public works." *Ibid.*, VI, 1553.

error, the Convention recommended that military officers "seize and secure" even those who came bearing flags of truce.²²

The death penalty was used sparingly. In Northampton County the court passed such a sentence on a group of thirteen slaves who had seized a schooner at Hungers Creek and sailed into the bay, their destination the James River. Overtaken by a whale boat, they were captured and sentenced to execution. But the Northampton Committee of Safety sent word to Williamsburg inquiring whether the punishment should not be mitigated since the seizure of the boat was more "intended to effect an escape to Dunmore than any other Design of committing a felony."²³ The fate of these particular slaves is uncertain, but the intervention of the Northampton Committee reflects a general reluctance to inflict the death penalty. Whenever it was carried out, as in the case of two runaways who mistook an armed vessel of the Virginia navy for a British man-of-war, it was used mainly "as an example to others."²⁴

Despite preventive efforts, whether an appeal to common sense or a resort to legal reprisals, many slaves made their way to the British, spurred in part by loyalist propaganda which promised them good treatment from the Governor. Some two hundred "immediately joined him," and within a week after the proclamation, three hundred. "Numbers of Negroes and Cowardly Scoundrels flock to his Standard," wrote a member of the provincial Committee of Safety.²⁵

Since Dunmore had no base on the mainland after mid-December 1775, the Negroes who sought his sanctuary were

22. *Ibid.*, VI, 1524.

23. James Kent and William Henry to Maryland Council of Safety, Feb. 28, 1776, *Arch. of Md.*, XI, 191; Northampton Committee of Safety to General Committee of Safety, Apr. 23, 1776, "Va. Leg. Papers," *Va. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, 15 (1908), 407.

24. *Va. Gaz.*, Apr. 13, 1776.

25. Northampton Committee of Safety to Continental Congress, Nov. 25, 1775, to General Committee of Safety, Apr. 23, 1776, "Va. Leg. Papers," *Va. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, 14 (1907), 251, 15 (1908), 407; Andrew Sprowel to Peter Paterson, Nov. 19, 1775, *ibid.*, 14 (1907), 387; John Page to Thomas Jefferson, Nov. 24, 1775, Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, 1950—), I, 265. Dunmore would have every reason to welcome runaways, but perhaps his reception of them fell short of the report, circulated in the *Virginia Gazette*, that on the evening the Governor's forces landed on Gwynn's Island, they amused themselves "with a promiscuous ball, which was opened, we hear, by a certain spruce little gentleman, with one of the black ladies." *Va. Gaz.*, May 31, 1776.

water-borne. Two weeks after the proclamation a group of slaves came down the James in a thirty-foot vessel, bound for the fleet off Norfolk, but they were captured near Surry. Shortly afterward seven Negroes broke out of a Northampton jail and "went off in a pettinger," bound for the British ships.²⁶ Colonel Landon Carter of the Sabine Hall plantation made a diary notation of the break for the open water executed by ten of his retainers:

26 Wednesday, June 1776. Last night after going to bed, Moses, my son's man, Joe, Billy, Postillion, John, Mullatto, Peter, Tom, Panticove, Manuel & Lancaster Sam, ran away, to be sure, to Ld. Dunmore, for they got privately into Beale's room before dark & took out my son's gun & one I had there, took out of his drawer in my passage all his ammunition furniture, Landon's bag of bullets and all the Powder, and went off in my Petty Auger [pettiauger] new trimmed, and it is supposed that Mr. Robinson's People are gone with them, for a skow they came down in is, it seems, at my landing. These accursed villians have stolen Landon's silver buckles, George's shirts, Tom Parker's new waistcoat & breeches.²⁷

The Negroes who reached the British were generally able-bodied men who could be put to many uses.²⁸ It was as soldiers, however, that Dunmore envisioned them, and from the beginning he enlisted them in his military forces. By early December he was arming them "as fast as they came in." Negro privates took part in a skirmish at Kemp's Landing in which the colonials were routed; indeed, slaves captured one of the two commanding colonels.²⁹ In the encounters preceding the action at Great Bridge, two runaways who were taken prisoner testified that the garrison was manned by thirty whites and ninety Negroes, and that "all the blacks who are sent to the fort at the great

26. *Va. Gaz.*, Jan. 10, 1776; *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), Feb. 22, 1776. Hereafter cited as *Md. Gaz.* "Pettinger" and "pettiauger" (below) are corruptions of the Spanish *piragua*, "a dugout," "a two-masted, flat-bottomed boat."

27. "Diary of Col. Landon Carter," *Wm. and Mary Qlty.*, 1st Ser., 20 (1912), 178-79.

28. Two women, however, were among a party of nine slaves who were seized in mid-December after putting out to sea in an open boat in an attempt to reach Norfolk. *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Phila.), Dec. 20, 1775. Hereafter cited as *Pa. Gaz.*

29. Dunmore to Sec. of State for Colonies, Dec. 6, 1775, Virginia: Official Correspondence, Peter Force-George Bancroft transcripts, Lib. Cong.; Edmund Pendleton to R. H. Lee, Nov. 27, 1775, *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., IV, 202.

Bridge, are supplied with muskets, Cartridges &c strictly ordered to use them defensively & offensively."³⁰ By the first of December the British had nearly three hundred slaves outfitted in military garb, with the inscription, "Liberty to Slaves," emblazoned across the breast of each. The Governor officially designated them "Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment."³¹

The first and only major military action in which Dunmore's forces engaged was the battle of Great Bridge.³² Of the Governor's troops of some six hundred men, nearly half were Negroes. Of the eighteen wounded prisoners taken by the Virginians in this rout, two were former slaves. One of them, James Anderson, was wounded "in the Forearm—Bones shattered and flesh much torn." The other one, Casar, was hit "in the Thigh, by a Ball, and 5 shot—one lodged."³³ After the fiasco at Great Bridge, the Governor was forced to operate from his ships. Taking aboard the hardiest of his Negro followers and placing them under officers who exercised them at small arms, he sanguinely awaited recruits.

Dunmore's use of Negroes also embraced maritime service. On the six tenders sent by the Governor to cannonade Hampton in late October 1775, there were colored crewmen, two of whom were captured when the Virginians seized the pilot boat *Hawk Tender*.³⁴ To man the small craft that scurried in and out of

30. William Woodford to Edmund Pendleton, Dec. 5, 1775, "The Woodford, Howe, and Lee Letters," *Richmond College Hist. Papers*, I (1915), 113. Added Woodford, "The bearer brings you one of the Balls taken out of the cartirages found upon the negro Prisoners, as they were extremely well made." *Ibid.*, 112.

31. *Md. Gaz.*, Dec. 14, 1775; Dunmore to Sec. of State for Colonies, Dec. 6, 1775, Virginia: Official Correspondence, Force-Bancroft transcripts.

32. For eyewitness accounts of the action at Great Bridge, see Willard, ed., *Letters on the American Revolution*, 234-35, 244-45; Thomas McKnight to Rev. Dr. McKnight, on board the *King's Fisher*, Dec. 26, 1775, Miscellaneous Collection, Clements Lib.; H. S. Parsons, "Contemporary English Accounts of the Destruction of Norfolk in 1776," *Wm. and Mary Qrtly.*, 2nd Ser., 13 (1933), 219-24; Richard Kidder Meade to Theodorick Bland, Jr., Norfolk Town Camp, Dec. 18, 1775, Charles Campbell, ed., *The Bland Papers* (Petersburg, Va., 1840-43), I, 38; "The Woodford, Howe, and Lee Letters," *Richmond College Hist. Papers*, I (1915), 96-163 *passim*; William Woodford to Edmund Pendleton, Dec. 10, 1775, *Md. Gaz.*, Dec. 21, 1775, Jan. 4, 1776. For Dunmore's account see Dunmore to Sec. of State for the Colonies, Dec. 13, 1775, Virginia: Official Correspondence, Force-Bancroft transcripts, Lib. Cong.

33. Woodford to Pendleton, Dec. 10, 1775, "The Woodford, Howe and Lee Letters," *Richmond College Hist. Papers*, I (1915), 118.

34. John Page to Thomas Jefferson, Nov. 11, 1775, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Jefferson*, I, 257.

the river settlements, harassing the plantations, the British depended largely on ex-slaves, particularly as pilots. Joseph Harris, a runaway, served as pilot of the *Otter*, having come to Captain Matthew Squire with the highest recommendation from a fellow naval officer. "I think him too useful to His Majesty's service to take away," wrote the latter, because of "his being well acquainted with many creeks in the *Eastern Shore*, at *York*, *James River*, and *Nansemond*, and many others," and "accustomed to pilot."³⁵ Two citizens on the Isle of Wight advised the chairman of the Virginia Committee of Safety to go slow on discharging "a Negro fello, named Caesar," who was not only "a very great Scoundrel" but also "a fello' they can't do well without being an Excellent pilot."³⁶

Another service performed by Dunmore's black followers was foraging. The Governor's supply of provisions, particularly fresh foods needed constant replenishment, and the Virginia leaders understandably would not permit the British to send men ashore to make purchases. "Back settlers" who might have been willing to supply his lordship with provisions had no means of conveying them, and Dunmore fell back upon the foraging abilities of his Negro recruits. Marauding parties of predominantly ex-slave composition preyed on the countryside, nightly descending upon plantations and making off with the choice livestock. One foraging party, captured while on its way to the Eastern Shore, was made up of "one white and sixteen blacks."³⁷

Allegedly one of the services of Negroes to Dunmore was germ spreading. That the charge of germ warfare was propaganda-laden did not make it less potent in arousing indignation. The accusation was that Dunmore had inoculated two Negroes and sent them ashore at Norfolk to spread the smallpox. The charge was ironic in view of the fate of the Negroes who fled to the British. The majority of them died of disease. Late in

35. George Montague to Matthew Squire, July 20, 1775, *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., II, 1692.

36. Thomas Pierce and Thomas Smith to Edmund Pendleton, Dec. 17, 1775, "Miscellaneous Colonial Documents," *Va. Mag. of Hist. and Biog.*, 19 (1911), 267.

37. "Extract of a letter to a gentleman in Scotland, dated Norfolk, Virginia, February 17, 1776," *Amer. Arch.*, 4th Ser., IV, 1166; Archibald Cary to R. H. Lee, Dec. 24, 1775, in Robert K. Brock, *Archibald Cary of Amptill* (Richmond, 1937), 161.

March the Governor informed his superior in England that the recruiting of the black regiment "would have been in great forwardness had not a fever crept in amongst them, which carried off a great many very fine fellows." He added that on advice of local physicians, he had concluded that the trouble came from overcrowding aboard ship and the lack of clothing, against both of which provision had now been made.³⁸

Nevertheless the plague persisted, killing off the Negroes and the Governor's hopes alike. Writing to Germain in June, Dunmore confessed defeat. The fever, he explained, was malignant, and had "carried off an incredible number of our people, especially blacks." Had this not happened he would have had 2,000 Negro followers. He was separating the sick from the well, he wrote, and would try to keep the two groups from intermingling.³⁹ The Governor's efforts were unavailing, it seems, for by early June 1776 there were not more than "150 effective Negro men," although each day the black corps was augmented by six to eight arrivals.⁴⁰

Failure to arrest the smallpox and the harassment by the Virginia and Maryland militia finally brought an end to his lordship's stay in Chesapeake waters. In May 1776, faced with the likelihood of heavy losses from disease, the fleet moved from their exposed quarters at Tucker's Mills near Portsmouth and took shelter on Gwynn's Island near the mouth of the Rappahannock. Nowhere were Dunmore and his "floating Town"⁴¹ allowed peace; "we no sooner appear off the land, than signals are made from it," he wrote, "and if we come to

38. *Va. Gaz.*, June 15, 1776; Dunmore to George Germain, Mar. 30, 1776, *Amer. Arch.*, 5th Ser., II, 159-60.

39. Dunmore to Germain, June 26, 1776, *ibid.*, II, 162. Dunmore's policy of isolation seems to have prevented the smallpox from decimating the white troops. The monthly return of the 14th Regiment of Infantry, signed by Capt. Sam Leslie, lists a total of 128 men (with breakdowns as to rank) for Mar. 1, 1776, a total of 126 men for Apr. 1, 1776, and a total of 122 for May 1, 1776. "Monthly Return of a Detachment of His Majesty's 14th Regiment of Infantry, off Norfolk, Virginia, 1 March 1776," "Monthly Return . . . 1 April 1776," and "Monthly Return . . . 1 May 1776," in Clinton Papers, Clements Lib. In addition to the factor of isolation, the mortality of the Negro soldiers may have been due to their performing most of the garrison and fatigue duties; at Gwynn's Island the entrenchments were guarded "chiefly by the black regiment." *Va. Gaz.*, June 1, 1776.

40. Entry of June 10, 1776, Andrew Snape Hamond Diaries, 1775-77, Univ. Va. Lib. Andrew Snape Hamond, Captain of the *Roebuck*, was the commanding officer in Virginia waters.

41. *Ibid.*, May 19, Aug. 5, 1776. The descriptive phrase is Hamond's.

anchor within cannon-shot of either shore, guns are immediately brought to bear upon us."⁴²

Early in July the British, after suffering an attack upon their shipping, took refuge on St. George's Island in the Potomac. By the end of the month the disease-ridden corps, lacking suitable drinking water and despairing of re-enforcements, prepared to leave. Dismantling, burning, or running aground 63 of their 103 vessels, they sailed out of the Potomac on August 6, seven of the ships bound for Sandy Hook and the others setting a southward course for St. Augustine and the Bermudas. With the departing fleet went some three hundred Negroes—the healthiest—who were going northward, destined for further military service. Dunmore's schemes had come to an inglorious end.⁴³

Perhaps not more than a total of eight hundred slaves had succeeded in reaching the British;⁴⁴ perhaps one-eighth of these had come with their loyalist masters. But Dunmore's proclamation undoubtedly had an indirect effect on thousands of other slaves, quickening their hopes for freedom. Perhaps it was only the imagination of newspaper editors that spawned such stories as that of a colored mother in New York naming her child after his lordship,⁴⁵ or of a Negro in Philadelphia jostling whites on the streets and telling them to wait until "lord Dunmore and his black regiment come, and then we will see who is to take the wall."⁴⁶ But whether fact or fabrication, such reports re-

42. Dunmore to George Germain, July 31, 1776, *Amer. Arch.*, 5th Ser., II, 166.

43. A. S. Hamond Diaries, Aug. 6, 1776, Univ. Va. Lib. Dunmore himself went to New York, arriving on Aug. 14, *Journals of Lieut.-Col. Stephen Kemble*, N.-Y. Hist. Soc., *Coll.*, Publication Fund, 16 (1884), 84. Dunmore remained convinced of the soundness of his plan to arm Negroes, reviving it even after Yorktown. See Percy Burdelle Caley, *Dunmore: Colonial Governor of New York and Virginia, 1770-1782* (unpubl. Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1939), 887-93. See also chapter IX below.

44. Dunmore's Negro followers were computed in general terms: e.g., ". . . came in a great number of Black Men from the Rebels." Logs of *Roebuck and Fowey*, in Greenwich Museum, England, entry of June 27, 1776. Photostat in A. S. Hamond MSS, Univ. Va. Lib.

45. Taking due note, the *New York Journal* carried an occasional poem, copied in the *Va. Gaz.*, May 25, 1776:

Hail! doughty Ethiopian Chief!
Though ignominious Negro Thief!
This Black shall prop thy sinking name,
And damn thee to perpetual fame.

46. *Ibid.*, Supplement, Dec. 29, 1775.

flect the expectant attitude that Dunmore engendered among colored people along the Chesapeake. It made no difference that he had offered freedom only to the bondmen of his enemies,⁴⁷ and that as governor he had withheld his signature from a bill against the slave trade; to those who whispered his name in slave quarters he was in truth the "African Hero" he was derisively dubbed by a Virginia patriot.⁴⁸

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If Dunmore was viewed by one group as a tyrant and by another as a liberator, this was but another paradox in a war that abounded in paradox. The Negro who fled to the Governor was actuated by the same love of liberty for which the colonists avowedly broke with the mother country. To the slave, his lordship's proclamation was an invitation to the fellowship of the free, and thus conformed with the times. But there were additional and more tangible signs and revelations of changes to come.

47. John King, runaway slave of a loyalist, was ordered discharged from the *King's Fisher*. Logs of *Roebuck* and *Fowey*, Feb. 23, 1776, photostats, A. S. Hamond MSS, Univ. Va. Lib.

48. R. H. Lee to Thomas Jefferson, July 21, 1776, James C. Ballagh, ed., *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, 2 vols. (New York, 1912-14), I, 210.