

## NORFOLK 02: Virginia Gazette

01: The Virginia Gazette (1775-1776)

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The second newspaper purported to have issued in Norfolk was actually produced on a ship anchored off the port town using the press that had printed the first. It represented a last-gasp effort by Virginia's final royal governor to affirm his authority over the colony, offering an authorized record – a gazette – of events as political dissent grew into a revolution.

The early history of Virginia journalism consists of a long line of papers entitled *The Virginia Gazette*. Even as the repetitive use of the name perplexes modern-day observers, that use embodies a declaration made by each of their publishers for the legitimacy and authority of their journal over that of any contemporary. The word itself dates to the days when only official, authorized information was circulated publically in highly-supervised journals; its use in America is linked to the first newspapers in each colony which served as government organs. In Virginia, the single, authoritative *Virginia Gazette* that first appeared in 1736 in Williamsburg evolved into three different Williamsburg *Gazettes* and one Norfolk *Gazette* by the summer of 1775, none of which was the official voice of the imperial administration.

That situation proved hugely problematic for the royal governor of Virginia, John Murray, 4th Earl Dunmore (153). His ineffectual attempts to defuse the political revolt that rose in the colony after the enactment of the Coercive Acts in 1774 turned the three Williamsburg *Gazettes* into vehicles for the various anti-Parliament factions in the Assembly. Then in early 1775, the one loyal *Gazette* published in Norfolk was propelled into the hands of local rebels by Dunmore's flight from the colonial capital with his family and lieutenants to ships in the Chesapeake, when his plans to level the plantations of the revolt's leaders became known publically. That paper – the *Virginia Gazette and Norfolk Intelligencer* of John Hunter Holt (223) – quickly became his most vitriolic critic, with its proprietor savaging Dunmore and his subordinates on a weekly basis. A key point in Holt's commentaries was the known "treason" of Dunmore's father, an actor in the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, which he asserted had now reappeared in the son, as seen in the governor's seaborne assaults on the British citizens of Virginia. By the end of September, Dunmore had grown tired of Holt's libelous criticisms and his seditious articles; he ordered a detail of marines to go ashore into Norfolk and seize the press, its supplies, and any workers found there, and return them to his custody off shore. The detail captured all those items excepting Holt.

While it was not apparently a motive for staging the raid, Dunmore now found that he had the capability of producing his own paper and other imprints; he was no longer dependent on "rebel" printers like Holt. Moreover, he had the willing cooperation of Holt's journeyman printers – Alexander Cameron (076) and Donald McDonald (286) – both loyalist Scotsmen. They conducted the seized press for Dunmore through the ensuing fall and winter. Initially, they were employed in producing official documents, primarily the forms and bills that he needed to manage his displaced administration. The most noteworthy of those items was Dunmore's proclamation of rebellion dated November 7, 1775. The broadside was a legally-mandated response to rebellion in the empire, a declaration requiring all loyal subjects of

the crown to rally to their sovereign's standard in order to suppress the rebellion. But in this case, Dunmore added the unique provision that if any enslaved Africans in Virginia heeded his call to arms, they would be given their freedom – a promise that prompted several thousand slaves to flee their masters in succeeding months.

Shortly thereafter, Dunmore turned his attention to the problem of addressing the colony without the filtering of the rebellious *Virginia Gazette*s in Williamsburg. On November 25, 1775, a true *Virginia Gazette*, published "by Authority" of the crown, was issued from the merchant vessel *Eilbeck*, now called *Dunmore*, printed by Cameron and McDonald. While it was intended to be published weekly, Dunmore's *Gazette* issued only intermittently until February 1776, as supplies and the other official work of the press allowed. Sometime after the issue of February 3, 1776, publication was ended; as only two numbers survive, it appears that the print-runs were very small, probably because of limited supplies, and that those runs were not widely or well distributed, which limited the effectiveness of the effort. In March 1776, Dunmore moved his fleet north up the Chesapeake, ending its Norfolk anchorage, and so establishing a clear "not after" date for the last official *Virginia Gazette*.

Dunmore left Virginia in August 1776 for New York after the Declaration of Independence had been adopted. He was accompanied by Cameron and McDonald, who brought the former Holt press with them. While Dunmore went on to London, the two printers stayed in New York where they were rewarded for their loyalty to the crown with employment as the official printers for the British forces in North America under Sir William Howe. After the war, Cameron was reunited with Dunmore in the Bahamas, where he served as the public-printer for that British colony under the governor he had last served in Virginia.

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Sources: LCCN No. 87-062000; Brigham II: 1129-1130; York County Records Project files, Colonial Williamsburg Research Department; Siebert, "Confiscated Revolutionary Press;" Selby, *Revolution in Virginia*; notices in Williamsburg's *Gazettes*, 1767-80.