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The Tyranny of Revolution

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THE TYRANNY OF REVOLUTION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

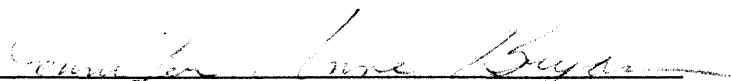
Jennifer Anne Bryan

1990

APPROVAL SHEET


This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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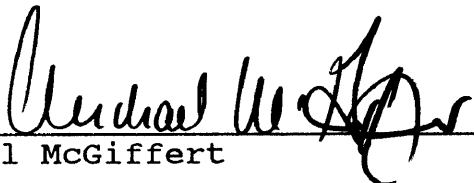


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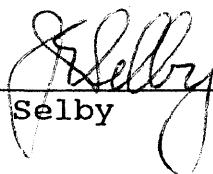
Approved, January 1990



James Axtell



Michael McGiffert



John Selby



THE ALTERNATIVE OF WILLIAMS-BURG.

Plate IV.

London Printed for R. Sayer, & J. Bennett, 37 St. Fleet Street, on the 1st. day of Feb 1779.

TO MY PARENTS

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The Alternative of Williams-Burg. Printed for Robert Sayer and J. Bennett. London, 1775.
Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of the Virginia county committees of safety in the years 1774-1776. The first chapter attempts to show similarities between the Virginia committees and revolutionary committees in England during the Civil War and Interregnum. The second chapter deals specifically with the county committees in Virginia.

The argument is that the committees, while part of a revolutionary movement attempting to obtain independence from Britain, suppressed the rights and liberties of those that opposed them, denying those opponents freedom of thought, speech, or action. The county committees in Virginia were a means for the landed families to maintain political power in a period that had great potential for social, as well as political, upheaval.

THE TYRANNY OF REVOLUTION

CHAPTER I
ANTECEDENTS

On October 20, 1774, the First Continental Congress adopted the Continental Association. Committees elected "in every county, city, and town" were to enforce the non-importation, non-consumption, non-exportation agreement.¹ During the transition from colonies to states, the committees became organs of revolutionary government. They raised arms and ammunition, organized militia, and dispensed justice. They also prohibited expressions of discontent, opened mail suspected of sedition, and suppressed gaming and other forms of "extravagance and dissipation."² They were, in effect, an "infinite number of petty tyrannies" infringing upon a free subject's right to think, speak, and act for himself.³ Yet they were integral parts of a revolutionary machine fighting for those same rights.

The Continental Association gave potency to Congress' demands: redress of colonial grievances and recognition of colonial rights. Congress had met in response to the Coercive Acts, a series of Parliamentary measures designed

¹Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, I (Washington, 1904), 79.

²Ibid., 78.

³William Eddis, Letters From America, ed. Aubrey C. Land (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 110.

to punish recalcitrant New Englanders for flouting British authority. The colonists perceived the acts as a threat to their liberties. The delegates thought an economic boycott would "prove the most speedy, effectual, and peaceable measure" to force Parliament to repeal its offensive legislation. Non-importation of all British goods would begin on December 1, 1774, non-consumption on March 1, 1775, and non-exportation on September 10, 1775. The agreement stipulated that local committees were to "observe the conduct of all persons touching the association," to publicize violations, and "to break off all dealings" with violators. The committees thus ensured "that all such foes to the rights of British-America might be publicly known and universally contemned as the enemies of American liberty."⁴

The American committees' roots stretch back to another revolutionary era, the time of the English Civil War and Interregnum. To the colonists, similarities between the periods were striking. Finance became a major issue in both seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century America. For example, the Bate Case of 1606 developed into a constitutional issue affecting the liberties of Parliament. In 1606, the court of exchequer decided against merchant John Bate for refusing to pay the import duty--imposition--on currants. The decision was unsurprising since Bate's

⁴Ford, Journals, I, 76-79.

refusal to pay contravened the Crown's right to levy impositions. Controversy came in 1608 when Robert Cecil, the lord treasurer, issued a new Book of Rates, the first major revision in English customs duties since the 1550s. Cecil had interpreted the judges' decision as giving the Crown the right to levy impositions as a source of revenue as well as a means of regulating trade. Such an interpretation was contrary to the "old, fundamental right" of Parliament that "no such charges should ever be laid upon the people without their common consent." James Whitelocke commented in Parliament in 1610:

If this power of imposing were quietly settled in our Kings, considering what the greatest use they make of assembling Parliaments, which is the supply of money, I do not see any likelihood to hope for often meetings in that kind because they would provide themselves by that other means.⁵

Over 150 years later, the colonists argued along similar lines against Parliament's taxation policies. Colonial distinction between "external" and "internal" taxes is certainly similar to the argument over impositions for regulating trade and those for raising revenue during James I's reign. One of the colonists' fears was that their legislatures, their miniature Parliaments, would become unnecessary if Parliament had the right to tax the colonies.

Governmental attempts to raise revenue led to similar

⁵Barry Coward, The Stuart Age (New York, 1980), 120.

results in the 1640s and 1770s. During his personal rule, Charles I initiated extremely onerous fiscal policies. Royal taxation was lighter than elsewhere in Europe but levied without Parliamentary, and thus the people's, consent. The Privy Council issued Books of Orders to justices of the peace and municipal authorities outlining local officials' duties in executing existing legislation. The Books laid the basis for centralizing and reforming local government. The justices, however, regarded them as central government's intrusion into their own sphere of influence.⁶ Charles' policies did little to enhance his popularity. Thus, in eighteenth-century America, colonists perceived Parliament's reorganization of the customs service and its declared right to legislate for the colonies in all cases whatsoever as an unwarrantable intrusion of central government into strictly colonial affairs. The cry "no taxation without representation" rang out along the Atlantic seaboard and, as Patrick Henry so eloquently declaimed, "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I his Cromwell, and George III may profit by their example."

The governments of both revolutionary eras made use of county committees. In some instances, committees in the two periods were similar both in composition, functions, and the reaction they inspired. William Eddis' eighteenth-

⁶Coward, Stuart Age, 145-146.

century comments about "petty tyrannies" echo the seventeenth-century words of Henry King, bishop of Chichester--"For new Committees, and your armed supplies,/Canton the land in petty tyrannies."⁷

The decisive breach between Charles I and Parliament came on August 22, 1642 when the king raised his standard at Nottingham. Civil war had arrived, despite efforts to prevent it. In 1643, Parliament established a new fiscal system to finance its war effort. Four ordinances created four new levies. Parliament appointed local committees to collect the revenue. At first, the local élite ran the committees but, as the war dragged on, men from outside the traditional ruling class became dominant. Minor manorial gentry, townsmen, lawyers, and army men increasingly infiltrated local government. The newcomers represented radical and centralizing tendencies of Parliamentary rule--the desire for "godly reformation" and the subordination of local interests to achieve victory in war. County opinion, however, favored retaining antebellum forms of society. Thus, the committeemen became an embattled minority.⁸

In creating the county committees, Parliament relied on the cooperation of local gentry--deputy lieutenants,

⁷Christopher Hill, God's Englishman (New York, 1970), 178.

⁸Coward, The Stuart Age, 181, 193.

sheriffs, and justices of the peace.⁹ Informal committees of deputy-lieutenants had existed in some counties for several generations.¹⁰ They had become permanent committees through regular meetings and a succession of Parliamentary ordinances expanding their duties. The Militia Ordinance of 1642 made the deputy-lieutenancy the basis for Parliament's military government. Although the committees in the finance ordinances were supposed to be different from the "militia" committees, membership was often the same.¹¹ The local gentry had raised money for subsidies and ship-money during Charles I's reign; now they raised money to finance a war against him.¹²

The committees were responsible for collecting forced loans from all substantial property owners and the "Weekly Pay," a tax on everyone above the level of wage laborer.¹³ The committees were also responsible for sequestration of Royalist estates, making certain that rents and profits of

⁹C.V. Wedgwood, The King's War (New York, 1959), 200-201.

¹⁰Alan Everitt, The Community of Kent in the Great Rebellion 1640-60 (Leicester, 1966), 126.

¹¹D.H. Pennington, "The County Community at War" in E.W. Ives, ed., The English Revolution 1600-1660 (New York, 1971), 65.

¹²Wedgwood, The King's War, 201.

¹³Pennington, "Community at War," 67.

Royalist landowners aided the Parliamentary cause.¹⁴ The ordinances of 1643 had instituted these levies and an excise that the merchant community administered directly, to provide more reliable and continuous financial sources than loans. The Ordinance for Bringing in Plate, Money, and Horses of June 9, 1642 had relied on the "goodwill" of the populace to pay for the war; but a protracted struggle demanded a more dependable fiscal system.¹⁵ The new taxation was akin to that of Charles I during his personal rule.

The committees, sometimes two or three in one county, enforced Parliament's "arbitrary" policies.¹⁶ The Ordinance for Raising Money for the Maintenance of the Army by a Weekly Assessment of February 24, 1643 named committees for each county and empowered them to collect the "Weekly Pay."¹⁷ Parliament based the assessment expected from each county on the supposed resources of each county. The amount exacted from Devonshire, £1,800 a week, was the highest.¹⁸

¹⁴Wedgwood, The King's War, 200.

¹⁵C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait, Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum 1642-1660, I (Abingdon, 1978), 8. [Reprint of 1911 edition]

¹⁶Coward, The Stuart Age, 193.

¹⁷Firth and Rait, Acts and Ordinances, 174.

¹⁸Wedgwood, The King's War, 201.

Somerset's share was £1,050.¹⁹ Westmoreland, in the bleak and distant north, had the lowest assessment (£24 5s).²⁰

The county committees collected the weekly (later monthly) assessment created in the 1643 ordinance until the Restoration. Administering ship-money and earlier subsidies provided the committees with the framework for raising the new tax. The Kent committee appointed between two and four assessors in each hundred to determine the income of all persons in the county. The committee then fixed the poundage necessary to meet Kent's quota--for example, 1s 5d in the pound on real estate and 9d on personalty. Then it apportioned the county total among lathal committees (Kent was divided into ten lathes) which then apportioned the lathal total among the hundreds and parishes. The parish and hundredal collectors received the payments and sent them to the lathal treasurers who sent them to the county treasurer. Collectors and other officials kept careful records and tried to ensure just assessments. The taxation system was remarkably efficient. Kent managed to fulfill its total assessment from 1643 to 1648 of approximately £391,000.²¹

Sequestering Royalist estates, the county committees'

¹⁹David Underdown, Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum (Newton-Abbot, 1973), 46.

²⁰Wedgwood, The King's War, 281.

²¹Everitt, Kent, 157-159.

most odious task, was a much less efficient means of raising revenue.²² Sequestration tended to separate radicals on the committees, those urging "godly reformation," from moderates who through ties of kinship or friendship wished to lessen the bitterness of civil war. Naturally, the committees' severity in dealing with Royalists varied from county to county.²³

Fortunately for Royalists, Parliament mitigated the harshness of sequestration. Beginning in January 1644, delinquents were allowed to "compound" if they subscribed to the Covenant and Negative Oath binding them to submit to Parliament. Composition was a monetary fine proportional to each delinquent's capital worth. Those Royalists that Parliament allowed to compound had to pay a fine, depending on their "malignancy," of one-third or one-tenth of their estates. Most Royalists reluctantly took the oaths and paid the fines to regain their estates but had no intention of keeping their word, as the following verse makes clear:

Since Goldsmiths' Committee
Affords us no pity,
Our sorrows in wine we will steep 'em,
They force us to take
Two oaths, but we'll make
A third, that we ne'er meant to keep 'em.²⁴

²²Everitt, Kent., 159.

²³Wedgwood, The King's War, 202.

²⁴Paul H. Hardacre, The Royalists During the Puritan Revolution, (The Hague, 1956), 20-23.

The central Committee for Compounding administered composition instead of the local committees. Sequestered monies had remained in the counties whereas composition fines went directly to the central government. Neither sequestration nor composition brought in as much revenue as the "Weekly Pay." In Kent in the years 1643-1652, the probable total from sequestration, composition, and sale of sequestered lands was about £350,000 compared to a yield from assessments of roughly £700,000 for the same period.²⁵

Radical members of the committees disliked composition. It took a certain amount of county income out of their control and increased assessments. The committees often complained that "the discharge of chief malignants" was "injurious to the cause."²⁶

Yet in some cases, the actions of the committees themselves were "injurious to the cause." The notorious behavior of sequestration officers contributed to murmurs of discontent. In Somerset sequestrators and soldiers assaulted Edward Burgh of Priston during a dispute over his composition and seriously injured his pregnant wife. The county marshall, in charge of the committee's jail, murdered the imprisoned dean of Wells, Dr. Walter Raleigh.²⁷ In Kent,

²⁵Everitt, Kent, 162.

²⁶Ibid., 141.

²⁷Underdown, Somerset, 139.

committee chairman Sir Anthony Weldon carried out a personal vendetta against Sir Roger Twysden, keeping his estate sequestered despite repeated Parliamentary orders to the contrary. Twysden had had the misfortune to best Weldon at law and for that transgression his estate remained sequestered until Weldon's death.²⁸ In Wales, committeemen and other officials apparently followed

the simple plan
That they should take who have the power
And they should keep who can.²⁹

Welsh Royalists and Parliamentarians switched sides as it suited their purposes. John Poyer probably decided to fight for the king in 1648 out of fear that his higher-born compatriots would force him to relinquish the revenues of Carew castle which he had enjoyed since 1644. In Carmarthenshire the "subtle ambo-dexter" Roger Lort of Stackpool, after serving the king for two years, became solicitor for sequestration for the express purpose (allegedly) of saving his own estate and those of his friends.³⁰ Such behavior failed to endear the committees to the community.

The change in the committees' personnel also offended county opinion. As the war continued, men from outside the

²⁸Everitt, Kent, 142.

²⁹A.H. Dodd, Studies in Stuart Wales (Cardiff, 1971), 118.

³⁰Ibid., 118.

traditional ruling class became more prominent. John Pyne, a lawyer and former member of Parliament, ruled the Somerset committee. His henchmen included a draper, a physician, an attorney with interests in the malting business, and several yeomen.³¹ In Warwickshire, the majority of non-Royalist gentry described the committeemen as "men of inconsiderable fortunes, others of little or no estate, and strangers in our county." Before the war, the southern gentry had controlled the shire's politics. Now minor northern gentry, Coventry men, and newcomers ran the committee.³² In Kent, the "parochial gentry" dominated the committee under the leadership of Sir Anthony Weldon. Weldon's ancestors had held minor posts at court but Sir Anthony had made some impolitic remarks about the Scots in 1617, resulting in his dismissal. From that time, he had an implacable enmity for the Stuarts. According to Twysden, Weldon perhaps "did not in his heart approve the actions of the two Houses, yet the desire of rule brought him to run with the forwardest."³³

The county gentry resented the newcomers; especially when they used paid informers, as did Edward Curll in Somerset, to hound Royalist landowners and discover attempted evasions of sequestration. Opponents accused Pyne

³¹Underdown, Somerset, 125.

³²Ann Hughes, Politics, Society and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620-1660 (Cambridge, 1987), 179.

³³Everitt, Kent, 121-126.

of sitting "as a committee himself, in his chamber" and having his subordinates rubber-stamp his orders. One critic accused him of being drunk at committee meetings and "inspired with sack."³⁴ According to Twysden, one was doomed if he "could not approve and run mad in complying with their horrid ways."³⁵ The gentry resented the "blue-new-made-gentlemen" whose single aim "was to keep the gentry under."³⁶ Many commoners despised the committeemen as well and looked back nostalgically to their "natural" rulers. In November 1646, Parliament's orders to the Somerset committee to dismantle the fortifications at Bridgewater led to an ugly incident. Many countrymen aided the committee in the dismantling operations but when they began to level the works around the castle, the committee decided these were not included in the Parliamentary order. The committee troop charged the crowd, "knocking countrymen in the head for doing as they [the committee] bid them" and killing several "poor men."³⁷

In 1647, the Glamorganshire gentry rose in rebellion. They accused the committee of encouraging servants and retainers to "insult over the Gentry" and "making all men of

³⁴Underdown, Somerset, 136.

³⁵Everitt, Kent, 135.

³⁶Underdown, Somerset, 134.

³⁷Ibid., 134,137.

considerable estate Delinquents" liable to sequestration.³⁸ The Kent gentry said, "It hath pleased God to confound and destroy us by...a numerous offspring of Committees...in a ruin so acute and violent as nothing but the wickedness of the last age could have invented."³⁹ They rebelled with the Royalists in 1648.

In 1650, An Act for the better Ordering and Managing the Estates of Papists and Delinquents reorganized the committee system. The Committee for Compounding took over sequestration, abolishing the local sequestration committees.⁴⁰ The Commonwealth and Protectorate would usher in more centralization, culminating in the rule of the major-generals. But the memories of the county committees, especially of sequestration, would be long-lived.

There are interesting parallels between the English committees and their eighteenth-century counterparts in Virginia. As in England, justices, sheriffs, vestrymen, and other local officials continued to exercise power in the community as committeemen. Virginia's revolutionary government divided the counties into districts, each district under the supervision of a subcommittee of the county committee. The county committees assessed each

³⁸Dodd, Wales, 120-121.

³⁹Everitt, Kent, 185.

⁴⁰C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait, Acts and Ordinances, II (Abingdon, 1978), 329-335. [Reprint of 1911 edition]

tithable to raise money for arms and ammunition, welcoming voluntary contributions as well and, as in England, the committees inspired bitter invective, summarily dealing with those opposing the revolutionary government.

At a meeting in Norwich, England on September 6, 1642, the members of Parliament and deputy-lieutenants of Norfolk County made some guidelines for running the county. At the meeting, "such persons as are notified to have done or practised anything to the disservice of Parliament shall be sent for to answer such complaint." The deputy-lieutenants were to encourage contributions of plate, money, horses, and arms. The magazines were to be put into safe custody. And

such persons as shall appear by speech or action to have encouraged or practiced any opposition to the proceedings of Parliament and disturbance of the public peace shall be disarmed for the service of the county.⁴¹

Over 100 years later, the Virginia county committees were engaged in basically the same activities. And when Virginia ratified the Constitution in 1788, it was as a commonwealth with the motto sic semper tyrannis.

⁴¹R.W. Ketton-Cremer, Norfolk in the Civil War (Hamden, Conn., 1970), 149.

CHAPTER II
VIRGINIA'S COMMITTEES OF SAFETY

Some committees already existed in Virginia prior to the Continental Association's enactment. After the Boston Tea Party and its consequences, the legislature had established a committee to correspond with other colonial committees in times of crisis, especially between sessions. In May, 1774, a circular letter arrived from Boston urging a general congress and a stoppage of trade with Great Britain. In response, Norfolk, Fredericksburg, Dumfries, and Alexandria formed their own committees of correspondence. In Williamsburg, twenty-five burgesses, remnants of the dissolved assembly, called for a convention to meet in Williamsburg on August 1, 1774. By the time the convention began, at least five counties--Norfolk, Stafford, Fairfax, Frederick, and Dunmore--had empowered their committees to enforce an economic boycott.⁴²

The first Virginia Convention adopted an association and recommended that committees "be chosen in each county by such persons as accede to this Association, to take effectual care that these Resolves be properly observed." The committees would publish the case of anyone violating the agreement in the gazettes and the county where the

⁴²John E. Selby, The Revolution in Virginia 1775-1783 (Williamsburg, Va., 1988), 9-10.

violator resided. Associators would thus brand violators as "inimical to this country, and break off every connection and all dealings with them." The delegates agreed to abide by any alterations Congress might make to the Virginia resolutions.⁴³

When Congress met, it used Virginia's resolves as a model for the Continental Association, including the use of committees as enforcement agencies. "Those qualified to vote for representatives in the legislature" would elect the committees.⁴⁴ In accordance with the Association, thirty-three Virginia counties and three towns had established committees by the end of 1774.⁴⁵ The Virginia Convention of March 1775 unanimously approved the Congressional proceedings of the previous year. The third Virginia Convention, meeting in July 1775, standardized the committee system. Since Congress had never specified the number of members constituting a committee, membership ranged from fifteen in Fincastle County to sixty-nine in Stafford County. The Convention ordained that those qualified to vote for burgesses were to elect twenty-one "of the most discreet, fit, and able men" to "act as a committee

⁴³Peter Force, comp., American Archives, 4th series, I (Washington, 1837), 686-688.

⁴⁴Ford, Journals, I, 79.

⁴⁵Larry Bowman, "The Virginia Committees of Safety, 1774-1776," in The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, LXXIX (1971), 323-324.

for carrying into execution the association."⁴⁶ The Convention also established an eleven member Committee of Safety under the chairmanship of Edmund Pendleton, Virginia delegate to Congress and signer of the Continental Association, to act as an executive body between conventions. The local committees, at least forty-six by 1775, came under control of the central Committee. They were thus integrated into the revolutionary government.

Some of Virginia's greatest Patriots sat on committees of safety: George Washington in Fairfax County; Edmund Pendleton in Caroline County; Richard Henry Lee in Westmoreland County; Benjamin Harrison in Charles City County; Richard Bland in Prince George County; Archibald Cary in Chesterfield County; and Peyton Randolph, Robert Carter Nicholas, and George Wythe in Williamsburg. All had served in the House of Burgesses. Randolph had been Speaker of the House since 1766. In that same year, Nicholas succeeded John Robinson as treasurer of the colony. George Wythe served as clerk of the House from 1769 to 1775. Randolph, Nicholas, Bland, Harrison, Pendleton, Lee, and Cary monopolized the chairmanship of all six standing

⁴⁶William W. 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, IX (Richmond and Philadelphia, 1821), 57.

committees from 1761 to 1774.⁴⁷ Leaders of Virginia's colonial government became leaders of its revolutionary government.

With few exceptions, those in power were members of prosperous and prominent landed families. These families had dominated the colony's politics for generations. Long settlement in eastern Virginia had produced communities of interconnected families with members or entire branches settled to the west. For the gentry, this extensive network made the colony almost like their parish.⁴⁸ The committees of safety illustrate the gentry's ubiquitousness. Benjamin Harrison's brother Carter Henry was a member of the Cumberland County committee of safety. Carter Henry's wife, Susannah Randolph, was Peyton Randolph's cousin and sister to Thomas Jefferson's mother. Mary Randolph, another cousin, was Archibald Cary's wife. The Carys' daughter Jane was married to Thomas Isham Randolph, yet another of Peyton's cousins and possibly the Thomas Randolph of the Chesterfield County committee. Richard Bland's mother Elizabeth Randolph was Peyton's aunt. The Blands were also tied to the Lees. Bland's sister Mary had married Henry Lee. Their son Richard sat on the Westmoreland County

⁴⁷Charles S. Sydnor, American Revolutionaries in the Making: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia (New York, 1965), 89.

⁴⁸Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill, 1982), 116-118.

committee of safety along with his cousin Richard Henry Lee. Peyton Randolph's wife was Elizabeth Harrison, sister of Benjamin and Carter Henry. The Harrisons were grandchildren of Robert "King" Carter, the wealthiest man in Virginia at his death in 1732. Their uncle Landon Carter was chairman of the Richmond County committee. Their cousin Robert Carter Nicholas, also one of "King" Carter's grandchildren, was married to Anne Cary, daughter of Wilson Cary, Archibald Cary's cousin. Of the seven chairmen of the House of Burgesses' standing committees, six were related.⁴⁹

Lists of committee members read like a Who Was Who of eighteenth-century Virginia gentry. George Washington's brother John Augustine sat on the Westmoreland County committee and his brother Charles and brother-in-law Fielding Lewis were members of the Spotsylvania County committee. Edmund Pendleton chaired the Caroline County committee on which his nephew Edmund Pendleton, Jr. also sat. James Madison, Sr. was chairman of the Orange County committee and his son James Madison, Jr., the future President, was also a member. Patrick Henry's brothers-in-law Colonel William Christian and Captain William Campbell belonged to the Fincastle County committee of safety. George Wythe's father-in-law Colonel Richard Taliaferro was

⁴⁹Richard Channing Moore Page, Genealogy of the Page Family in Virginia (Harrisonburg, Va., 1972), 251-272. [Reprint of 1893 edition]

a member of the James City County committee. Also on that committee were Colonel Nathaniel Burwell of Carter's Grove, descendant of "King" Carter, and his cousin Lewis Burwell, Jr. George Wythe's wife's cousin Walker Taliaferro sat on the Caroline County committee. Walker's sister Lucy had been Charles Carter of Cleve's third wife. Charles Carter's daughter by his second wife Anne Byrd was married to William Armistead whose brother John was a member of the Caroline County committee. John's brother-in-law George Baylor also sat on the committee. The same names appear time after time; four Carringtons on the Cumberland County committee; three Lynes on the King and Queen County committee; Armisteads; Taylors; Egglestons; Eppes; Mayos; Walkers; and on and on.

Virginia's élite found itself in the vanguard of revolution to keep authority in the proper hands--those of the rich, well-born, and able. The rise of evangelical Protestantism and discoveries after his death of Speaker-Treasurer John Robinson's malfeasance had begun to challenge the gentry's hegemony. Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists threatened the established church. Robinson's loans of paper money to influential and indebted planters had, after his death, resulted in a scandal that called the ruling élite's governance into question. The gentry led the opposition against Britain to control popular disaffection and preserve its prerogative.

Most committeemen had previously held public office and were firmly attached to the system that gave them power. The gentry had dominated county courts and parish vestries. In the twenty-year period prior to the American Revolution about 1600 men served as justices of the peace. Fifty-five families provided four hundred and twenty of the 1600 total. At least three-fourths of the justices came from no more than three or four hundred families. No matter where in the colony they resided, justices were among the wealthiest and most influential men in their community. Many simultaneously served as vestrymen. Acting as the county court, they directly or indirectly chose every other county official. Commonly, the sheriff was the oldest justice in point of commission and the militia officers were justices.⁵⁰ When a member of the court retired, a younger relative usually replaced him. The courts were self-perpetuating bodies, emphasizing the social authority of the gentlemen justices rather than the special authority of legal professionals.⁵¹ Justices of the county courts became the core of many committees. According to Lord Dunmore, "there is not a Justice of the Peace in Virginia that acts, except as a Committee-man."⁵² In most cases, at least half

⁵⁰Sydnor, Revolutionaries, 62-65, 84-85.

⁵¹Isaac, Transformation, 133.

⁵²Force, American Archives, 4th series, I, 1062.

of the committee consisted of justices. For example, of the twenty members of the Caroline County committee, eleven had been justices; of the fifteen members of the Fincastle committee, ten had been justices; of the twenty-one members of the Cumberland County committee, eleven had been justices; of the sixteen members of the Southampton County committee, ten had been justices; and of the twenty-one members of the Westmoreland County committee, eleven had been justices.⁵³

Extralegal committees of safety replaced legal county courts as centers of power in the local community. Participation in courthouse proceedings were, for most men, the primary method of understanding the structure of authority.⁵⁴ After August 1774, however, the courts refused to sit because the schedule of court fees had expired with the governor's dissolution of the last assembly. Committee elections, resolutions, meetings at courthouses, and cores of former justices filled the void and kept the gentry in command.

In Virginia, committees of safety were responsible for making certain that every inhabitant subscribed to the Continental Association. True patriotism went beyond simple

⁵³"Justices of the Peace of Colonial Virginia, 1757-1775," in Virginia State Library Bulletin, 14 (Richmond, 1922).

⁵⁴Isaac, Transformation, 93.

obedience to the boycott agreement. Proving one's loyalty to the cause required one's signature and the use of respectful language regarding the provincial and Congressional resolves. Public meetings at county courthouses to sign the Association were a means for the gentry to reinforce its authority. In Virginia's agrarian society, public signing of a formal document was a significant act. The community ostracized non-associators and publicized their conduct. Usually offenders, wishing to be restored to the benefits of society, would make a public apology in the committees' presence.

For example, Andrew Leckie, a Port Royal merchant, confessed his folly before the Caroline County committee and a large group of citizens on court day, October 13, 1774. When the committee had presented the provincial association for signing, Leckie had turned to a Negro boy and said, "'Piss Jack, turn about my Boy and sign.'" Leckie attributed his comment to "a natural and unhappy Perverseness of Temper." He hoped his apology would regain the public's favor, "an Assurance of which would be the greatest Consolation I could have under the unsupportable Weight of publick Censure and publick Hatred."⁵⁵

⁵⁵William J. Van Schreeven and Robert L. Scribner, comp., Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence, II (Charlottesville, 1975), 160-162.

The Princess Anne County committee declared John Saunders inimical to America after he repeatedly refused to sign either the provincial association or the Continental Association. In refusing to sign the Congressional agreement, Saunders alleged that the "way of proceeding was illegal." The committee wanted Saunders to retract his statement but, he declined. Committeeman Jacob Hunter, one of Saunders' friends, finally persuaded the young man to sign the Association. In so doing, however, Saunders added a "no" after his signature, a "no, with a capital N!" The committee decided it could not tolerate such a mark of contempt and therefore held Saunders up to public censure.⁵⁶

Forcing every inhabitant to sign the Association placed each Virginian in a position of either open hostility or active friendship towards America. A man could disapprove of the boycott agreement without violating its stipulations but in Virginia that option was non-existent.⁵⁷ Nicholas Cresswell noted in his journal that he was "obliged to act the hypocrite" and extoll the Congressional proceedings though "in my heart I despise them and look upon them with contempt."⁵⁸ The threat of ostracism was a powerful check

⁵⁶Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia., II, 222-223.

⁵⁷Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution 1763-1776 (New York, 1939), 514.

⁵⁸Nicholas Cresswell, The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell (New York, 1928), 46.

on freedom of speech or thought.

In Landon Carter's opinion, those disagreeing with the Association should leave the country. Freedom of conscience mattered little to the chairman of the Richmond County committee.

Suppose 100 men were in a bark on a most dangerous coast or in some other unhappy situation, and Suppose 99 of them should conclude such a method the best to avoid the danger or extricate out of the difficulty and one should be of a different opinion and in that endeavour to counteract the 99. What should not be done to such an one?⁵⁹

Private sentiments might lead to actions hostile to the Patriot cause. Thus, according to Carter, "no prudence nor any kind of reason ought to induce a community to suffer their [dissenters] residence amongst them."⁶⁰

Revolutionary Virginians were obviously unwilling to tolerate differences of opinion. Benjamin Dingly Gray, a non-associator, suffered the wrath of the Princess Anne County committee. The committee had posted a list of non-associators to the market house in Norfolk. Seeing his name on the list, Gray railed against the committee with "disrespectful, scurrilous, and abusive words." He branded the committee as a "pack of damn'd rascals" for publishing

⁵⁹Landon Carter, The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778, ed. Jack P. Greene, II (Richmond, 1987), 933.

⁶⁰Carter, Diary, II, 933.

his name in a way that kept him from defending his position. Instead of printing the list of non-associators in the gazettes, as Gray had wished, the Princess Anne committee printed Gray's conduct, to expose him to "publick animadversion."⁶¹

Merchants were naturally unenthusiastic about an economic boycott yet most signed the Continental Association. Unlike the commercial classes in the northern colonies, Virginia merchants had no centers of influence like Philadelphia or New York. The landed élite held the reins of government and the merchants were powerless to resist the gentry's numbers and organization.⁶² Virginians had long lived by a credit system and many prominent persons were in debt to British merchant houses. By the end of 1773, Virginians owed John Norton and Sons £41,000. The gentleman's role as intermediary between small planters and English markets had been reduced with the expansion of Glasgow merchant houses' activities in the mid-eighteenth century. Instead of receiving and returning consignments, the Scots established stores at various locations throughout the colony. At these trading posts, their agents sold imported goods on credit in exchange for tobacco. They

⁶¹Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 223.

⁶²Hamilton J. Eckenrode, The Revolution in Virginia (Cambridge, Mass., 1916), 100-101.

shipped the tobacco to Glasgow where it was marketed for the merchants' profit.⁶³ According to James Parker, Glasgow factors were the greatest objects of resentment because so many Virginians owed them money.⁶⁴

Thus, non-importation was, in a way, advantageous to the gentry. Creditors had no legal recourse against debtors since the courts were closed. Lord Dunmore claimed the principal reason for shutting the courts was to frustrate English creditors into siding with the colonists.⁶⁵ Also, an economic boycott, while aiding debtors, stunted the growth of the merchant class in the colony. Large tobacco growers could prevent the middle men, the interlopers, from becoming more influential.

For the first few months of the Association, non-importation would scarcely be felt. Anticipating that the colonists would adopt some sort of economic sanctions, merchants had imported more goods than usual. Importations into Maryland and Virginia increased from £328,904 in 1773 to £528,738 in 1774. The general consensus was that the stock of merchandise available on December 1 would last for almost two years. This estimate was too generous but the

⁶³Isaac, Transformation, 137.

⁶⁴James Parker to Charles Steuart, October 26, 1774. Steuart Family Papers, Microfilm copy, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library.

⁶⁵Force, American Archives, 4th series, I, 1062.

large supply made enforcement of non-importation easier than it otherwise would have been. Well-stocked merchants were less likely to defy Congress' and the committees' regulations.⁶⁶ Besides, many merchants probably assumed relations between Britain and her colonies would soon improve. An economic boycott had been extremely effective in forcing repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766. Signing the Association was more politic than refusing to sign and endangering one's business.

At the merchants' meeting in Williamsburg in November, 1774, over four hundred members of the trade professed support of the Association in a written address to the colony's delegates. The traders presented the Association "voluntarily and generally signed" and resolved to "adhere strictly thereto." The delegates, in their reply, considered it "very meritorious" that the merchants had joined with them in the "great struggle for liberty."⁶⁷ It is questionable, however, how voluntarily merchants appended their signatures to the boycott agreement. James Parker had written to Charles Steuart in late October that the Patriots intended to force factors to sign the Association at the meeting in Williamsburg. He also reported the consequences of Port Royal merchant James Dunlop's refusal to sign the

⁶⁶Schlesinger, Merchants, 473-475.

⁶⁷Virginia Gazette (Pinckney) November 10, 1774.

Virginia non-importation resolves. A group of concerned citizens gathered and gave Dunlop the choice of being hanged, having his warehouse and invoices burnt, or signing the provincial association.⁶⁸ One can assume he "voluntarily" signed the association.

The committees of safety quickly began to fulfill their duties. Enforcing non-consumption, "an effectual security for the observation of the non-importation," was one of the committees' responsibilities. Except for taxed tea, non-consumption began on March 1, 1775. The Congressional delegates agreed, however, to purchase or use no East India Company tea from the day the Association went into effect. Many Americans regarded the Tea Act of 1773 as the first step in Parliamentary suppression of colonial liberties. As Virginia's August resolves proclaimed, tea was the "detestable instrument which laid the foundation of the present sufferings of our distressed friends in the town of Boston" and as such "we view it with horroure."⁶⁹

As early as August 22, the Norfolk committee asked the consignees of nine chests of tea to return the newly arrived packages before unloading them. The owners agreed to comply with the committee's request. Simon Fraser of Middlesex County reported in October that a chest of tea consigned to

⁶⁸James Parker to Charles Steuart, October 26, 1774. Steuart Family Papers.

⁶⁹Force, American Archives, 4th series, I, 687.

him had arrived in Norfolk. He pledged that he would send the chest back on the same ship that had brought it. The Caroline County committee ordered inhabitants of the county to deliver their tea to a committee member who would store it and record the quantity. The Northampton County committee had likewise recommended that the people of their county give their tea to committee member Colonel Littleton Savage. He received 416 pounds of tea. "Some Gentlemen also brought their tea to the [Northampton] courthouse, and desired it might be publickly burnt, in which reasonable request they were instantly gratified."⁷⁰

In March 1774, Captain Howard Esten sailed his ship Virginia up the York River. He must have been apprehensive as he approached his destination. In the darkness of the hold, among various and sundry goods, lay two half chests of tea--154 pounds of the East India Company's product. As he gazed at the familiar shoreline, Esten probably recalled what the Bostonians had done the previous December when tea ships had arrived in their harbor. The "tea party" had failed to amuse Parliament and Massachusetts now suffered under the Coercive Acts for the escapade. Esten's employers John Norton and Sons were certainly nervous about their shipment. They instructed Esten before he left London in September to consult the Virginia Committee of

⁷⁰Virginia Gazette (Dixon & Hunter) February 4, 1775.

Correspondence before moving the tea. If the Virginians refused to let him unload, store, or return the chests, Esten was to propose destroying them.⁷¹

As the ship lay at anchor off Yorktown on the morning of November 7, several burgesses met in Williamsburg to decide the tea's future. While deliberations proceeded, twenty-three members of the Gloucester County committee assembled in Gloucester to await word from the capital. Across the river in Yorktown, angry citizens gathered at ten o'clock and proceeded to board the Virginia. Morning was almost spent and still no word from Williamsburg. Patience wore thin. Probably at least one proud Virginian suggested that Boston's example be followed, defying Parliament to treat Virginians the same way as New Englanders. Ropes and pulleys began to strain and creak as the tea chests emerged from the bowels of the ship. Soon, hyson and common green tea were steeping in the waters of the York River.⁷²

The Gloucester committee waited until after twelve o'clock to hear from Williamsburg before arriving at the ship. By then, the tea had "met with its deserved Fate." Returning across the river, the committee made several resolutions. First, that John Norton was guilty of a "daring Insult upon the People of this Colony, to whom he

⁷¹Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 219.

⁷²Ibid., II, 163-164.

owes his ALL." Second, that the Virginia should sail without a return cargo. Third, that Virginians consign no commodities to John Norton until he made concessions. Fourth, that a public example be made of Williamsburg merchant John Prentis for ordering the tea. Fifth, that Howard Esten, because of his imprudent actions, must suffer the displeasure of Gloucester County's inhabitants.⁷³

Two days later, the York County committee met and drew up its own resolutions. It highly approved of the conduct of the citizens of Yorktown--certainly a few of the committee's members must have been among those on board the Virginia. James Parker claimed that Thomas Nelson, Jr., and Thomas Lillie were the most active. John Prentis had either to make concessions or "be made to feel the Resentment of the Publick." The Virginia had to leave in eighteen days with no cargo. The committee censured Howard Esten for failing to strenuously protest against loading the tea onto his ship. The York committee also recommended that Virginians make certain every ship in a similar situation suffer the same consequences.⁷⁴

Faced with losing business or publicly apologizing, John Prentis chose the latter course. In the same Gazette that published the Gloucester and York County committees'

⁷³Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 163.

⁷⁴Ibid., II, 166.

reports, Prentis asked the populace to forgive him for neglecting to countermand his orders for the tea. The Gazette printed John Norton's explanation for his company's part in the affair on May 6, 1775. In two letters dated January 5 and January 16, Norton explained that his company had been uneasy about the order and had hoped to receive new instructions from Prentis and Company. None arrived and Norton and Sons received word of the Virginia association the day before Esten sailed. By then the ship had already cleared and was at Gravesend. Although Norton thought the Virginia resolves required Congress' sanction, he still instructed Esten "by no means attempt the landing it [the tea] without leave." Norton hoped that "such a plain and faithful narration of facts" would vindicate him and he declared that Parliament had "not the least shadow of right to tax America."⁷⁵

Virginians had gone far beyond the strictures of the Association when they dumped John Prentis' tea into the York River. Although the Virginia association forbade tea's importation after August 6, the delegates had agreed that any changes Congress might make to their resolves "shall be binding upon this colony."⁷⁶ According to the Continental Association, non-importation of all goods, including tea,

⁷⁵Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 175, 218-219, 238-239.

⁷⁶Force, American Archives, 4th series, I, 688.

would begin on December 1. Thus, neither Prentis nor Norton had violated the importation resolution.

To import tea, however, was to flirt with danger as merchants Anthony Warwick and Michael Wallace discovered. Warwick and Wallace had each imported East India tea aboard the ship Ross which arrived in Norfolk in November 1774. The Norfolk County committee asked the two merchants to land the tea in Norfolk but they objected, citing that the bill of lading required the tea to be landed at Milner's warehouse in Nansemond County. Warwick and Wallace promised that once the tea arrived at its destination, they would deliver it to the Nansemond County committee. Apparently, they never fulfilled their promise. A member of the Nansemond committee, seeing Warwick at the meeting of merchants in Williamsburg, demanded of him if he had imported any tea. Warwick promptly replied that he had imported one chest along with other goods, and that in his absence it had been sent to a store in Carolina. He was willing, though, to have the tea brought back and delivered to the Nansemond County committee which might do whatever it liked with the chest. Wallace added that he too had imported a half chest of tea on the same ship and that it was at Milner's ready to be handed over to the committee. Warwick and Wallace then "voluntarily" signed the Association, declaring they were "well pleased therewith." The Nansemond County committee reported that the two

merchants "seemed sorry that their intentions should be misconstrued."⁷⁷

The story of Warwick and Wallace printed in the Virginia Gazette omitted a few details. Letters of William Aitchison and James Parker show how voluntarily the merchants acceded to the Continental Association. While the body of the trade were meeting in Williamsburg, Archibald Cary ordered that a pole be erected opposite the Raleigh Tavern "upon which was hung a large mop & a bag of feathers, under it a [barrel] of tar."⁷⁸ A committee meeting under Cary's chairmanship wrote out a formal complaint against Warwick and Wallace. George Nicholas, the Treasurer's son, ranted against them, questioning how they dared affront the "Majesty of the People." Several gentlemen threatened the two merchants' lives but decided tar and feathers was the slightest punishment for their mistake. Warwick and Wallace "got clear" through the intercession of Randolph, Pendleton, Bland, and others. Colonel Robert Munford, burgess from Mecklenburg County and a Patriot, told the committee that "such proceedings were more arbitrary than any the americans were complaining of & tended to destroying there Course." After all, Warwick and Wallace could import until December

⁷⁷Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 172-173.

⁷⁸James Parker to Charles Steuart, November 21, 1774. Steuart Family Papers.

1, 1774. Yet Colonel Munford was in the minority that day. "Every method" was used to obtain merchants' signatures, "Little England...preaching up the terrible consequences of refusal." For the merchants, "there is no contending against such Numbers."⁷⁹

The Virginia committees had the power to inspect merchants' daybooks and invoices to ensure compliance with the Association. To prevent sharp increases in prices on scarce goods, the ninth article forbade any trader to sell merchandise at rates higher than what had been customary for the preceding twelve months. If the person did violate the Association, residents would cease to have any dealings with him or his factor or agent.⁸⁰ Merchants were expected to allow committeemen to inspect their accounts. If they refused, the committees published their names in the gazettes and encouraged the populace to avoid doing business with them.

Many merchants refused to allow the committees to inspect their books out of a matter of principle rather than any violation of the Association. But principles mattered little to the inquisitorial committees. Christopher McConnico, a factor in Charlotte County for Alexander Speirs

⁷⁹James Parker to Charles Steuart, November 21, 1774. Steuart Family Papers. William Aitchison to James Parker, November 14, 1774. Parker Family Papers, Microfilm copy, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library.

⁸⁰Ford, Journals, I, 78.

and Company, suffered at the hands of the local committee. When a delegation arrived at his home to inspect his accounts, McConnico denied the men access to his books on the grounds that he lacked his employer's permission for such an inspection. The committee determined that McConnico's refusal was a failure to comply with the Association, which he had signed, and "induces a suspicion of his having taken advantage in the sale of goods." All dealings with McConnico were to cease although no actual proof of his guilt existed. William Barksdale was shrewder than his colleague. He not only produced his books when the committee asked for them but gave the committee as well "all the assistance and information in the course of their examination that they required." McConnico later allowed the committee to inspect his accounts and it discovered that his conduct had been flawless. The committee then lifted the boycott it had imposed but in the meantime, eight months, McConnico's reputation had been tarnished.⁸¹

Port Royal merchants James Miller, Andrew Leckie, James Dunlop, William Dickson, John Wallace, and Patrick Kennan refused to allow the Caroline County committee to examine their books. They thus aroused suspicion that they were "transgressing" the Association and the committee ordered

⁸¹Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, 283, 290. Peter Force, comp., American Archives, 4th series, III (Washington, 1840), 1623.

that all dealings with them cease. The merchants further provoked the gentlemen of the committee by their "contumacious" conduct in publishing a "specious appeal to the people" in justification of their refusal. According to the committeemen, the merchants should have made their explanations at the committee meeting where their arguments would have received "impartial consideration." Edmund Pendleton, committee chairman, requested that Miller, Leckie, and the others appear at the committee's next meeting. Pendleton added that he was

authorized to engage the faith of the Committee that no kind of injurie shall be offered to your persons or such of you as may attend to morrow during your attendance coming and returning.⁸²

The merchants appeared, apologized for any misunderstanding, and allowed the committee to inspect their books. The committee determined that Miller, Leckie, and the others had adhered to the Association and it lifted its censure against them.⁸³ Yet, once again, a committee had acted on suspicion rather than actual proof.

The fear of bodily harm was apparently very real, hence the Caroline committee's guarantee of personal safety. The Isle of Wight committee had charged Smithfield merchant

⁸²Edmund Pendleton, The Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton 1734-1803, ed. David John Mays, I (Charlottesville, 1967), 99.

⁸³Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 246.

George Purdie with violating the Association. It summoned him to appear to answer the charge but Purdie declined to attend because he had heard the people would tar and feather him whether innocent or guilty. He appealed to the committee for its protection which it granted "provided he appears innocent." Purdie decided to remain at home.⁸⁴

The Virginia Gazette reported only one incidence of tarring and feathering. Yet Nicholas Cresswell noted in his journal that the populace had tarred and feathered some merchants or burnt and destroyed their property. Tar and feathers had been visible during the merchants' meeting in Williamsburg, certainly encouraging some, like Michael Wallace and Anthony Warwick, to sign the Association. Warwick managed to emerge unscathed from that episode but his luck ran out in August 1775. The Nansemond County committee, suspecting Warwick of violating the Association, summoned him to appear before it. He agreed to come only if the committee promised to protect him from the people of Isle of Wight County. (The threats against Purdie were made in July). According to the Gazette, Warwick had abused Isle of Wight's inhabitants in making his request. This information "some worthy gentlemen of Nansemond" imparted to their neighbors. The affronted inhabitants of Isle of

⁸⁴H.R. McIlwaine, Proceedings of the Committee of Safety of Cumberland and Isle of Wight Counties Virginia 1775-1776 (Richmond, 1919), 47-48.

Wight seized Warwick. They transported him to Smithfield where the committee could decide his fate. Too many members were absent, however, for the committee to make a verdict. Therefore the populace, no doubt led by the gentlemen who were present, passed its own sentence, leading Warwick to the stocks and giving him "a fashionable suit of tar and feathers." The citizens then mounted him on his horse and drove him out of town through a shower of eggs. So much for the Nansemond County committee's protection.⁸⁵

A few merchants did attempt to violate the Association but so closely did the committees watch their activities that offenders seldom went unpunished. The committees had managed to establish a subtle espionage system. For example, in Cumberland County a person who suspected a merchant of wrongdoing was to report to three or more members of the committee. The Isle of Wight committee resolved to post the ninth article of the Association at the courthouse and every public place. Alert citizens could then inform the committee if any trader had increased his prices.⁸⁶ The Charles City County committee resolved that when any one member of the committee had been informed or had reason to believe that someone had violated the Association, he was to summon at least three of his

⁸⁵Virginia Gazette (Pinckney) August 24, 1775.

⁸⁶McIlwaine, Cumberland and Isle of Wight, 8, 42.

colleagues to examine the matter. If the accusation was "well-founded" then the gentlemen were to consult the chairman who would summon the entire committee.⁸⁷ John Blatt, Jr., an apprentice to merchants John and George Fowler of Alexandria, publicly apologized to the Gloucester County committee for raising prices on a cargo of goods. Charles Marshall, captain of the sloop transporting Blatt and his merchandise, also publicly apologized. He had made some imprudent statements such as every man had a right to sell at the highest price he could. "These are offences I am (as have been some other North Britons) taught to know, at this time, deserve severe punishment." Thus Captain Marshall repented and signed the Association.⁸⁸ Martin Fisher of Westmoreland County complained against Henry Glass for charging more for his goods, especially coffee and sugar, than he was allowed to under the Association. Glass told the committee he "would sell his goods as he pleased and in their teeth." The committee decided such behavior deserved public censure.⁸⁹ Reactions such as Glass' were the exception rather than the rule.

Although non-importation began on December 1, British

⁸⁷Virginia Gazette (Dixon and Hunter), January 14, 1775.

⁸⁸Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 235.

⁸⁹Richard Barksdale Harwell, ed. The Committees of Safety of Westmoreland and Fincastle (Richmond, 1956), 52.

goods could land until February 1 because some ships had cleared port before the Association went into effect. According to the tenth article, importers of goods arriving after December 1 were to reship the items or deliver them to the committees to be stored or publicly auctioned. If auctioned, the committees would reimburse the owner from the sales, "the profit, if any, to be applied towards relieving...inhabitants of the town of Boston, as are immediate sufferers of the Boston port-bill."⁹⁰ No British goods could land after February 1, 1775. The committees made certain that the owners reshipped the unopened packages to Britain. The committees placed notices of goods stored, sold or reshipped in the papers.

The Virginia committees found themselves extremely busy in the winter of 1774-1775 supervising public auctions. For example, on December 7 John Prentis informed Robert Carter Nicholas, chairman of the James City County committee, that a parcel of cutlery he had ordered in the summer, worth £40 10s, had arrived on board the ship Warwick and was at the committee's disposal. Prentis had obviously learned that discretion is the better part of valor after his tea had ended up in the York River. Alexander Purdie, the Williamsburg printer, had imported by the same ship a package of thread and a keg of herring, which information he

⁹⁰Ford, Journals, I, 79.

gave to Nicholas. The James City County committee, thanking Prentis and Purdie, resolved to sell the goods after twice advertising the sale in the Gazette. Richard Taliaferro, William Spratley, Champion Travis, Cary Wilkinson, and John Warburton, or any three of them, were responsible for advertising and handling the auction. The sub-committee set the date of sale for January 19 at eleven o'clock in front of the Raleigh Tavern. On that date, the Williamsburg committee notified the public that several packages of European goods would be for sale on the 25th starting at ten o'clock in the morning in front of John Greenhow's store.⁹¹

Elsewhere, Alexandria merchants John Fitzgerald and Valentine Peers notified the Fairfax committee on December 19 that they had received a shipment of Irish linen worth £1101 4s 8d and, in accordance with the Association, wanted the committee to sell it. The committee appointed five of its members to handle the sale. The auction took place on December 24 at three o'clock in the afternoon and the linens sold for £1106 14s 8d leaving a profit of £5 10s for those suffering from the Boston Port Bill. On January 6, the Nansemond County committee sold sundry goods at auction resulting in a profit of £2 10d for the relief of the Bostonians. On January 9, the Prince George County committee supervised a sale of goods at David Russell's

⁹¹Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 184-185, 189-190, 203, 209, 225, 228, 265.

store in Blandford.

Sales of goods continued after February 1. On February 13, 1775, Smithfield merchant John Sym informed the Isle of Wight County committee that he had received a shipment of Irish linen and wished it to be sold in accordance with the Association. The committee appointed five of its members to direct the sale. On February 21, chairman John Scarsbrook Wills informed the committee that Richard Mackie had received a package of woolens from the same ship that had brought the linen to Sym and that Mackie also wanted his goods to be sold. Once again the committee appointed members to handle the sale.⁹² On February 24, the Elizabeth City County committee ordered a sale in Hampton of various goods belonging to Robson and Meredith of North Carolina. The gentlemen had asked the committee to auction their merchandise which included saddles, silk, lawn, muslin, and Barcelona handkerchiefs. The New Kent County committee supervised a sale of goods worth £9 14s 7d on March 9, 1775.⁹³ The committees were extremely vigilant in their duties and most merchants obviously preferred to give up their goods for auction rather than take the risk of violating the Association.

One case in particular illustrates the frustration that

⁹²McIlwaine, Cumberland and Isle of Wight, 43.

⁹³Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, 303, 319.

must have existed in dealing with the committees. Dr. Alexander Gordon of Norfolk had imported, among other goods, a case of medicines worth £200. He came before the Norfolk committee on January 23, 1775 to ask if he could keep the medicines as they were exempted from non-importation in the Virginia association. The committee told Gordon that the Continental Association superseded the provincial agreement and that the Congressional resolves against importation included medicines. [The first article states, "we will not import...any goods, wares, or merchandise whatsoever."]⁹⁴ Gordon then chose to store his medicines rather than sell them. This decision surprized the committee and it tried to convince him to change his mind. The committeemen explained to Gordon that "where there did not appear in the importers any design to contravene the provincial or continental associations, there had never been an instance in this place of the inhabitants bidding against the proprietors." They assured Gordon that he would in all likelihood be able to purchase his medicines "at the very trifling expence of only the vendue master's charge." The doctor, however, remained adamant and demanded that the committee appoint persons to receive his packages. The two members so appointed expected Gordon to send for them but after waiting two or three days, one of them finally asked Gordon what he had done with his

⁹⁴Ford, Journals, I, 76.

case of medicines. The doctor had decided to store it himself until he received an answer to a letter he had written to Peyton Randolph.⁹⁵

Unfortunately, no copy of Gordon's letter is known to exist but one can imagine what he might have written. He probably questioned why he should have to put his goods up for auction if in all probability no one would bid against him. The items were already his and to pay for them twice just to satisfy the letter of the Association must have seemed pointless. Certainly the committee had some latitude in interpreting exactly what the terms "goods, wares, or merchandise" covered. Gordon must have asked if medicines could truly be considered a commodity. Randolph's reply is unknown, but whatever he said, the committee gave the doctor another chance to store or sell his goods. Having had his plea fall on deaf ears, Gordon refused to hand over his medicines or an invoice of the goods. For his actions, the committee gave "it as our unanimous opinion, that doctor Alexander Gordon has violated the continental association."⁹⁶ In Dr. Gordon's case, patriotic Virginians strictly adhered to the Continental Association yet when it came to John Prentis', Michael Wallace's, and Anthony Warwick's tea, these same Patriots were willing to bend the

⁹⁵Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 259-260, 270.

⁹⁶Ibid., 278.

rules.

The county committees disallowed any expressions of discontent with the revolutionary government. David Wardrobe, a teacher in Westmoreland County, felt the committees' might early in the struggle. He had had the misfortune to have a personal letter published in the Glasgow Journal; a letter describing the situation in Virginia, including an account of the hanging and burning of Lord North's effigy. The letter carried no invective. Wardrobe was simply exercising his right as a British subject to express his opinion. Although his name had remained unpublished, the Westmoreland County committee soon found the author. In the committee's opinion, the letter was "false, scandalous, and inimical to America"--perhaps because Wardrobe noted that "a few gentlemen" showed the most emotion as flames consumed Lord North's effigy. The committee, including that illustrious Patriot Richard Henry Lee, resolved that the vestryhouse no longer be furnished to Wardrobe as a schoolroom, that parents immediately withdraw their children from his school, and that Wardrobe publish "forthwith" a letter in the gazettes expressing his remorse for "traducing" the people. Wardrobe had little choice but to comply. His apology concluded:

I do, most heartily and willingly, on my knees, implore the forgiveness of this country for so ungrateful a return made for the advantages I have received from it, and the bread I have earned in it, and hope, from this contrition for my

offence, I shall be at least admitted to
subsist amongst the people I greatly
esteem [sic].⁹⁷

These proceedings occurred on November 8, 1774, two weeks after Congress had adopted the Association. Wardrobe had written his letter in June.

In December 1774, the Hanover County committee forced an apology out of Malcolm Hart. Hart had voiced his belief that a little gold would buy "American Virtue" and induce the people to side with Britain. He also allowed his tongue to utter "sundry Things in Contempt of the Cause of American Liberty." To appease his countrymen, he publicly professed his sincere sorrow and promised to change his future conduct. John Morriss of Spotsylvania County acknowledged he was guilty of using "expressions foreign from the good of this Country" and apologized for his behavior.⁹⁸

In January 1776, the Fincastle committee summoned John Spratt to appear before it after it learned he had "damnd this Commee" and said he would raise one hundred men for the king. Spratt had a low opinion of the committee, especially of its chairman William Preston for he said he had fifteen loads of powder for it, two of which were for Preston alone. Spratt was "restored to the Friendship and Confidence of his Countrymen" after making concessions to the committee and

⁹⁷Harwell, Westmoreland and Fincastle, 32-36.

⁹⁸Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 180, 199-200.

taking an oath of allegiance to Virginia.⁹⁹ Robert Scruggs of Cumberland County appeared before the committee to answer charges that he had made speeches against the committee and the "great American Struggle for Liberty." Scruggs admitted his guilt and "upon his Confession and Promise of a cautious Conduct for the future," the committee dismissed his case.¹⁰⁰ According to Cresswell, "It is as much a person's life is worth to speak disrespectfully of the Congress."¹⁰¹

The committees censured clergy as readily as laity. In Virginia, few Anglican ministers dared to express Loyalist sentiments, in part perhaps because they had to rely on the goodwill of the vestries for their income. An incoming rector of a Virginia parish had to make alliances with the rich and powerful and their relations, the very men who became members of the committees of safety. John Randolph had warned some clergymen

against disobliging or offending any person of note in the Colony...; for says he, either by blood or marriage, we are almost all related, or so connected in our own interests, that whoever of a Stranger presumes to offend any one of us will infallibly find an enemy of the whole, nor, right nor wrong, do we ever forsake him, till by one means or other, his ruin is accomplished.¹⁰²

⁹⁹Harwell, Westmoreland and Fincastle, 76, 80.

¹⁰⁰McIlwaine, Cumberland and Isle of Wight, 38-39.

¹⁰¹Cresswell, Journal, 57.

¹⁰²Isaac, Transformation, 145.

The Reverend John Agnew of Suffolk parish received the Nansemond County committee's censure for preaching against the Association and associators. The gentlemen of the parish found Agnew's sermons offensive and one asked him to desist. Agnew replied, "If you do not like such sermons, you can only leave your seat." In conversation, Agnew "affirmed" that to resist king and Parliament was rebellion and that Congress' proceedings constituted resistance. To further upset the gentlemen of the committee, Agnew accused the committee of invading private property by selling a Carolina man's goods against his will. The committee, having "too much regard for our own characters to suffer them to be injured by so bare-faced a slander," proceeded to explain the situation regarding the Carolina gentleman's goods. Samuel Donaldson, merchant and committee member, informed his colleagues that his friend John Thompson, a North Carolina merchant, had imported some goods into Virginia. Donaldson advertised a sale the same day. The committee was slightly displeased that Donaldson had acted on his own before it had considered the matter but appointed members to supervise the sale. "Mr. Thompson bought the goods, expressed himself highly satisfied, and insisted on our partaking of a cheerful bowl with him."¹⁰³ Perhaps Donaldson and Thompson had found the ideal way to work

¹⁰³Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 314-315.

around the committee system. And perhaps the rector was somewhat correct in his statement since, in all probability, Thompson would rather have avoided putting his goods up for auction. The committee, however, chastised Agnew for freely expressing his opinion.

The Orange County committee also found fault with an Anglican minister. The Reverend John Wingate possessed five pamphlets "containing very obnoxious reflections on the Continental Congress and their proceedings." The committee asked Wingate for the pamphlets but he refused to give them up, saying they belonged to someone else. He would allow the committee to look at them provided it returned them unhurt. This the committee was unwilling to do and finally "peremptorily demanded" the pamphlets. When Wingate handed them over, the committee decided to publicly burn them.¹⁰⁴ The authors of the tracts were Samuel Seabury and Isaac Wilkins and, according to the committee, the county's inhabitants expressed

a noble indignation against such execrable publications, and their ardent wishes for an opportunity of inflicting on the authors, publishers, and their abettors, the punishment due to their insufferable arrogance, and atrocious crimes.¹⁰⁵

Obviously in Virginia, English rights of free speech and

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 377-378.

¹⁰⁵Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 386.

free press applied only when one expressed revolutionary sentiments. It was an "atrocious crime" to advocate, as Seabury did, petitioning Parliament through legally constituted assemblies instead of an extralegal Congress. Yet to resist king and Parliament was "very meritorious." The "punishment due" those mentioned in the committee's report was probably tar and feathers, or worse.

The committees regulated personal behavior to an extraordinary degree. An informant told the Pittsylvania County committee that John Pigg was using East India tea in his household. The committee summoned Pigg to appear before it to answer the charge. Pigg refused, telling the summoner he would do as he pleased and would pay no attention to the committee's order. Thus Pigg became "a traitor to his country, and inimical to American liberty." The committee decreed that all dealings with Pigg cease until he reinstated himself into the goodwill of the populace.¹⁰⁶ Prohibiting forms of "extravagance and dissipation" was part of the committees' duties as well. Violations included gambling at cards, dice, horseracing, and cockfighting or giving gloves and scarves at funerals. Through this regulation, Congress intended to promote frugality, economy, and industry.¹⁰⁷ The committee usually reprimanded offenders

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 300.

¹⁰⁷Ford, Journals, I, 78.

and dropped the charges. Francis Moore, Jr. appeared before the Orange County committee and confessed that he had violated the Association by gaming. He "gave such evidence of his penitence" that the committee readmitted Moore to the friends of the cause until a second transgression.¹⁰⁸ In Cumberland County, John Scruggs admitted to gaming and, like Moore, "exhibited such Marks of true Penitence" that he was allowed to remain in the society of patriotic Virginians.¹⁰⁹ Rodham Kenner, however, became an enemy of America when he violated the Association a second time after promising to mend his ways.¹¹⁰

The committees further intruded into people's lives by opening mail suspected of sedition. Nicholas Cresswell remarked that in writing to his friends at home, he had to "appear a little Whigified" since he anticipated a committee or some fervent citizen would open his letters. In February 1775, he commented that he had received no letters from home and expected none to arrive since the "rascals" seized foreign mail. In March, he entrusted some letters describing his true sentiments to a friend bound for Leghorn. Unfortunately for Cresswell, the Alexandria committee received his intercepted letters and immediately

¹⁰⁸Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 302.

¹⁰⁹McIlwaine, Cumberland and Isle of Wight, 12.

¹¹⁰Bowman, "Committees of Safety," 331.

declared him inimical to American liberty. Cresswell had left on a journey to the western part of the colony but upon his return, the committee resolved to jail Cresswell until he was "fully convinced of his political errors." Only through the intercession of Thomson Mason did Cresswell escape his punishment.¹¹¹ John Hatley Norton wrote to his father in the fall of 1775 that all the elder Norton's letters had been opened "in Convention." Letters intercepted the previous week from "the Tories to their Friends in Britain" revealed sentiments inimical to America.¹¹² Committees stopping and opening the mail had apparently created such inconvenience that in April 1776, Congress resolved that only the Council or Committee of Safety in each colony should stop the post, open mail, or detain letters.¹¹³ In Virginia, one could neither express one's opinion in public nor in private conversation or correspondence if that opinion ran counter to the revolutionary cause.

The committees of safety carefully watched travellers and the Virginia Committee of Safety required all visitors to report their reasons for their trips to the local committees. The purpose of checking on travellers was to

¹¹¹Cresswell, Journal, 45, 57, 226.

¹¹²Frances Norton Mason, ed., John Norton & Sons Merchants of London and Virginia (Richmond, 1937), 391.

¹¹³Virginia Gazette (Purdie), May 10, 1776.

reduce spying. A Loyalist wrote from Portsmouth on November 10, 1775 that, "It is not now possible for any of our Country men to travel the country without a pass from the Committees or Commanding officers, which none of them can procure."¹¹⁴ The Alexandria committee suspected Cresswell of spying and prohibited him from leaving the colony.¹¹⁵ The Nansemond County committee branded Betsy Hunter and Mary and Martha Wilkinson as enemies to America for writing "letters of intelligence." Betsy Hunter had written letters to her mother and brother in Norfolk describing the military activities in Nansemond County. She told the committee she had written them for her own amusement but the committee decided they were "intended as letters of intelligence." The Wilkinsons were included in the committee's censure because they had helped with the letters.¹¹⁶ The Gloucester committee found John Wilkie guilty of supplying Lord Dunmore with vital information. The Committee of Safety upheld the verdict, imprisoned Wilkie, and confiscated and sold his estate.¹¹⁷

On May 27, 1776, the fifth Virginia Convention adopted a test oath which the committees were responsible for

¹¹⁴Eckenrode, Revolution, 116.

¹¹⁵Cresswell, Journal, 165.

¹¹⁶Force, American Archives, III, 1632-33.

¹¹⁷Bowman, "Committees of Safety," 332.

administering. This oath bound the subscriber to aid Virginia's government in the war, not to help the enemy in any way, and to expose conspiracies and plots. Thus, individuals opposed to the revolutionary government but not openly hostile to it were brought to the surface through the use of the test oath.¹¹⁸

Those in power sometimes were accused themselves of violating the Association. Someone in Hanover County accused Colonel John Syme of selling goods at higher prices than allowed under the Association. Syme was Patrick Henry's half brother and a member of the House of Burgesses. According to the committee's report, Syme had given "express orders" to his storekeepers to sell at the same rate unless the committee directed otherwise. Apparently, Syme's storekeepers had neglected to pass this information along to some of his customers. The committee exonerated Syme but since he was in financial difficulty, there probably was some basis for suspecting him of violating the Association.¹¹⁹

The Reverend Agnew claimed that "the designs of the great men were to ruin the poor people." The minister believed the élite would abandon the cause, place the blame on the lower classes, and "by this means make them

¹¹⁸Eckenrode, Revolution, 118-119.

¹¹⁹Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 220-224.

slaves."¹²⁰ Henry Glass, guilty of violating the Association, also made disparaging statements about committees and their authority. He remarked that the slaves in his part of the country were treated harshly and that they would be justified in burning their masters' houses.¹²¹

Landon Carter noted in his diary on May 1, 1776 that "a certain G.R." had refused to lend his gun "to go against the tender, asked the People if they were such fools to go to protect the Gentleman's houses on the river side; he thought it would be better if they were burnt down." In Carter's opinion, people like G.R. only wanted attention to show others "what persecution they endure by resisting the rich or, as they call them, the Gentlemen." The incident had been reported to a committeeman but no action was taken against G.R.¹²²

Although the élite continued to hold power in the revolutionary government, there was some change in the old guard. Robert Munford and Matthew Marable, burgesses for Mecklenburg County since 1765 and 1769 respectively, were defeated in the summer elections of 1774. Both were Patriots but their contenders attacked them as "aristocrats." Robert Burton and Bennett Goode appealed to

¹²⁰Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 315.

¹²¹Harwell, Westmoreland and Fincastle, 52-53.

¹²²Carter, Diary, 1030.

small landowners (Burton held only 500 acres) to win election as delegates to the first Convention.¹²³ In Caroline County, Edmund Pendleton complained in June 1774 that some people "fond of novelty" had set up two "boys"-- Thomas Lomax and George Baylor--to run against Pendleton's colleague Colonel James Taylor.¹²⁴ Lomax and Baylor were in their twenties and though unsuccessful in defeating Taylor, both became members of the Caroline County committee of safety.

With the outbreak of hostilities, the committees became responsible for organizing militia and raising arms and ammunition. In writing to the Earl of Dartmouth in 1774, Lord Dunmore had commented that every county was raising a volunteer company.¹²⁵ As early as November 3, 1774, Cresswell noted that he saw the independent company exercise.¹²⁶ On January 17, 1775, the Fairfax County committee resolved to recommend that freeholders from the ages of sixteen to fifty form themselves into companies of sixty-eight men.¹²⁷ By the summer of 1775, various counties had raised at least thirty volunteer companies. The House

¹²³Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 359-360.

¹²⁴Pendleton, Letters, I, 94.

¹²⁵Force, American Archives, I, 1061.

¹²⁶Cresswell, Journal, 46.

¹²⁷Force, American Archives, I, 1145.

of Burgesses' committee investigating the cause of unrest in the colony in June 1775, heard testimony from one or more persons from eight different counties stating that the independent companies would protect the county committees if asked to do so.¹²⁸ The Lancaster County volunteers had resolved on June 9 to protect Peyton Randolph, the other delegates, and "all other firends to American liberty, whom the abandoned tools of Administration may dare to attack."¹²⁹

The Virginia Convention of March 1775 recommended that the county committees collect from each tithable a sum of money sufficient to purchase one-half pound of gunpowder and one pound of lead, plus flints and cartridge paper.¹³⁰ The Fairfax committee in its January resolutions had recommended that each tithable contribute three shillings. The sheriff or some other appointee would collect the money and also a list of those refusing to pay.¹³¹ The Spotsylvania County committee had resolved in December 1774 to provide 1000 pounds of gunpowder and 4000 weight of lead along with a sufficient number of flints for the county's use. The

¹²⁸Charles Ramsdell Lingley, THE Transition in Virginia from Colony to Commonwealth, (New York, 1910), 106.

¹²⁹Force, American Archives, 4th series, II (Washington, 1839), 938.

¹³⁰Ibid., 169.

¹³¹Force, American Archives, I, 1145.

committee would defray the expense through subscriptions.¹³² The Southampton committee members each contributed £10 to buy powder since they were unable to raise the money any other way.¹³³

The July-August 1775 Virginia Convention divided the colony into sixteen districts and required each to raise 500 minutemen. The county committees handled enlistments, bounty money, expenses of recruiters, and supervised the organization of the units.¹³⁴ No longer did the committees have to rely on public censure alone to stifle opposition.

The county committees of safety, enforcing the Continental Association and the resolves of the Virginia Conventions and Continental Congress, were the organs of revolutionary government at the local level. They ceased to exist when the state constitution went into effect in the summer of 1776. They were transitory elements in the shift from colonial to state government. While they provided continuity during a time of upheaval, they also, in Eddis' words, were:

an infinite number of petty tyrannies...in every one of which a few despots lord it over the calm and moderate, inflame the passions of the mob, and pronounce those to be enemies to the general good who may presume in

¹³²Van Schreeven and Scribner, Revolutionary Virginia, II, 197.

¹³³Bowman, "Committees of Safety," 335.

¹³⁴Ibid., 336.

any way to dissent from the creed they have thought proper to impose.¹³⁵

Certainly the pressure of public censure kept many from openly condemning the Association or its enforcement agencies. Yet the committees must have been hardpressed to justify their actions when they suppressed the rights of individuals in a revolution that was supposed to guarantee those rights. In some instances they were as oppressive as Parliament, if not more so. And in that sense they are true relations of the English committees. Parliament's policies, the "Weekly Pay," central government's intrusion into local affairs, and imprisonment without trial, seemed to many identical to Charles I's policies in the 1620s and 1630s.¹³⁶

The Welsh quote,

Rhag nerth y Committee Lefyd
Libera nos domine

(From the power of the Committee too,
Good Lord deliver us)¹³⁷

also applied in the eighteenth century. The Loyalist minister Samuel Seabury wrote, "If I must be devoured, let me be devoured by the jaws of a lion, and not gnawed to death by rats and vermin."¹³⁸ The Virginia committees were

¹³⁵Eddis, Letters, 110.

¹³⁶Coward, Stuart Age, 195.

¹³⁷Dodd, Wales, 176.

¹³⁸Samuel Seabury, Letters of a Westchester Farmer, 1774-1775 (New York, 1970), 61. [Reprint of 1931 edition]

indeed petty tyrannies.

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