



## **Was the American Revolution Avoidable? Online Seminar**

Selected readings from

### ***Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis.***

Edmund S. Morgan, editor (UNC Press, 1959).

- New York Assembly, Petition to the House of Commons, October 18, 1764. (pp. 8-17)
- American Reaction: George Mason to the Committee of London Merchants, June 6, 1766. (pp. 158-163)

# Prologue to Revolution

## *Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764-1766*

EDITED BY

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## 2. The New York Petition to the House of Commons, October 18, 1764

[*Journal of the Votes and Proceedings of the  
General Assembly* (New York, 1766), II, 776-79.]

*To the Honourable the Knights, Citizens and Burgesses, representing the Commons of Great-Britain, in Parliament assembled.*

*The Representation and Petition of the General-Assembly of the Colony of New-York.*

*Most humbly Shew,*

That from the Year 1683, to this Day,

there have been three Legislative Branches in this Colony; consisting of the Governor and Council appointed by the Crown, and the Representatives chosen by the People, who, besides the Power of making Laws for the Colony, have enjoyed the Right of Taxing the Subject for the Support of the Government.

Under this Political Frame, the Colony

was settled by Protestant Emigrants from several Parts of *Europe*, and more especially from *Great-Britain* and *Ireland*: And as it was originally modelled with the Intervention of the Crown, and not excepted to by the Realm of *England* before, nor by *Great-Britain*, since the Union, the Planters and Settlers conceived the strongest Hopes, that the Colony had gained a civil Constitution, which, so far at least as the Rights and Privileges of the People were concerned, would remain permanent, and be transmitted to their latest Posterity.

It is therefore with equal Concern and Surprize, that they have received Intimations of certain Designs lately formed, if possible, to induce the Parliament of *Great-Britain*, to impose Taxes upon the Subjects *here*, by Laws to be passed *there*; and as we who have the Honour to represent them, conceive that this Innovation, will greatly affect the Interest of the Crown and the Nation, and reduce the Colony to absolute Ruin; it became our indispensable Duty, to trouble you with a seasonable Representation of the Claim of our Constituents, to an Exemption from the Burthen of all Taxes not granted by themselves, and their Foresight of the tragical Consequences of an Adoption of the contrary Principle, to the Crown, the Mother Country, themselves and their Posterity.

Had the Freedom from all Taxes not granted by ourselves been enjoyed as a *Privilege*, we are confident the Wisdom and Justice of the *British* Parliament, would rather establish than destroy it, unless by our abuse of it, the Forfeiture was justly incurred; but his Majesty's Colony of *New-York*, can not only defy the whole World to impeach their Fidelity, but appeal to all the Records of their past Transactions, as well for the fullest Proof of their steady Affection to the Mother Country, as for their strenuous Efforts, to support the Government, and advance the general Interest of the whole *British* Empire.

It has been their particular Misfortune, to be always most exposed to the Incur-sions of the *Canadians*, and the more barbarous Irruptions of the Savages of the Desert, as may appear by all the Maps of this Country; and in many Wars we have suffered an immense Loss both of Blood and Treasure, to repel the Foe, and maintain a valuable Dependency upon the *British* Crown.

On no Occasion can we be justly reproached for with-holding a necessary Supply, our Taxes have been equal to our Abilities, and confessed to be so by the Crown; for Proof of which we refer to the Speeches of our Governors in all Times of War; and though we remember with great Gratitude, that in those grand and united Struggles, which were lately directed for the Conquest of *Canada*, Part of our Expences was reimbursed, yet we cannot suppress the Remark, that our Contribution surpassed our Strength, even in the Opinion of the Parliament, who under that Conviction, thought it but just to take off Part of the Burthen, to which we had loyally and voluntarily submitted; in a Word, if there is any Merit in facilitating on all Occasions, the publick Measures in the remote Extremes of the national Dominion, and in preserving untainted Loyalty and chearful Obedience, it is ours; and (with Submission) un-abused, nay more, well improved Privileges cannot, ought not, to be taken away from any People.

But an Exemption from the Burthen of ungranted, involuntary Taxes, must be the grand Principle of every free State.— Without such a Right vested in themselves, exclusive of all others, there can be no Liberty, no Happiness, no Security; it is inseparable from the very Idea of Property, for who can call that his own, which may be taken away at the Pleasure of another? And so evidently does this appear to be the natural Right of Mankind, that even conquered tributary States, though subject to the Payment of a fixed

periodical Tribute, never were reduced to so abject and forlorn a Condition, as to yield to all the Burthens which their Conquerors might at any future Time think fit to impose. The Tribute paid, the Debt was discharged; and the Remainder they could call their own.

And if conquered Vassals upon the Principle even of *natural Justice*, may claim a Freedom from Assessments unbounded and unassented to, without which they would sustain the Loss of every Thing, and Life itself become intolerable, with how much Propriety and Boldness may we proceed to inform the Commons of *Great-Britain*, who, to their distinguished Honour, have in all Ages asserted the Liberties of Mankind, that the People of this Colony, inspired by the Genius of their Mother Country, nobly disdain the thought of claiming that Exemption as a *Privilege*.— They found it on a Basis more honourable, solid and stable; they challenge it, and glory in it as their Right. That Right their Ancestors enjoyed in *Great-Britain* and *Ireland*; their Descendants returning to those Kingdoms, enjoy it again: And that it may be exercised by his Majesty's Subjects at Home, and justly denied to those who submitted to Poverty, Barbarian Wars, Loss of Blood, Loss of Money, personal Fatigues, and ten Thousand unutterable Hardships, to enlarge the Trade, Wealth, and Dominion of the Nation; or, to speak with the most unexceptionable Modesty, that when as *Subjects*, all have equal Merit; a Fatal, nay the most odious Discrimination should nevertheless be made between them, no Sophistry can recommend the Sober, impartial Decision of common Sense. J

Our Constituents exult in that glorious Model of Government, of which your Hon. House is so essential a Part; and earnestly pray the Almighty Governor of all, long to support the due Distribution of the Power of the Nation in the three great Legislative Branches. But the Advocates for divesting us of the Right to tax ourselves,

would by the Success of their Machination, render the Devolution of all civil Power upon the *Crown alone*, a Government more favourable, and therefore more eligible to these *American* Dependences. The supreme Ruler in a Monarchy, even in a despotic Monarchy, will naturally consider his Relation to be, what it is, equal to all his good Subjects: And equal Dispensation of Favours will be the natural Consequence of those Views; and the Increase of mutual Affection must be productive of an Increase of the Felicity of *all*. But no History can furnish an Instance of a Constitution to permit one Part of a Dominion to be taxed by another, and that too in Effect, but by a Branch of that other Part; who in all Bills for public Aids, suffer not the least Alteration.— And if such an absurd and unequal Constitution should be adopted, who, that considers the natural Reluctance of Mankind to burthens, and their Inclination to cast them upon the Shoulders of others, cannot foresee, that while the People on one Side of the *Atlantic*, enjoy an Exemption from the Load, those on the other, must submit to the most unsupportable Oppression and Tyranny.

Against these Evils, the Indulgence of the present Parliament, of which we have had such large Experience, cannot provide, if the grand Right to tax ourselves is invaded. Depressed by the Prospect of an endless Train of the most distressing Mischiefs, naturally attendant upon such an Innovation, his Majesty's *American* Subjects, will think it no inconsiderable Augmentation of their Misery, that the Measure itself implies the most severe and unmerited Censure, and is urged, as far as they are acquainted, by no good Reasons of State.

They are unconscious of any Conduct, that brings the least Imputation upon their Love and Loyalty, and whoever has accused them, has abused both the Colonies and their Mother Country; more faithful Subjects his Majesty has not, in any Part

of his Dominions, nor *Britain* more submissive and affectionate Sons.

And if our Contributions to the Support of the Government upon this Continent, or for the Maintenance of an Army, to awe and subdue the Savages should be thought necessary, why shall it be presumed, without a Trial, that we more than others, will refuse to hearken to a just Requisition from the Crown? To Requisitions for Aids salutary to our own Interests? Or why should a more incorrigible and unreasonable Spirit be imputed to us, than to the Parliament of *Ireland*, or any other of his Majesty's Subjects?

Left to the Enjoyment of our antient Rights, the Government will be truly informed when a Tax is necessary, and of the Abilities of the People; and there will be an equitable Partition of the Burthen. And as the publick Charges will necessarily increase with the Increase of the Country, and the Augmentation or Reduction of the Force kept up, be regulated by the Power and Temper of our barbarian Enemy, the Necessity for continuing the present Model must appear to be most strongly enforced.— At the remote Distance of the *British* Commons from the sequestered Shades of the interior Parts of this Desart, false Intelligence of the State of the *Indians* may be given; whereas the Vicinity of the Colonies will enable them, not only, to detect all false Alarms, and check all fraudulent Accounts, but urge them by the never failing Motive of Self-Preservation, to oppose any hostile Attempts upon their Borders.

Nor will the Candour of the Commons of *Great-Britain*, construe our Earnestness to maintain this Plea, to arise from a Desire of Independency upon the supreme Power of the Parliament. Of so extravagant a Disregard to our own Interests we cannot be guilty.— From what other Quarter can we hope for Protection? We reject the Thought with the utmost Abhorrence; and a perfect Knowledge of this Country will afford the fullest Proof, that

nothing in our Temper can give the least Ground for such a Jealousy.

¶The peaceable and invariable Submission of the Colonies, for a Century past, forbids the Imputation, or proves it a Calumny.— What can be more apparent, than that the State which exercises a Sovereignty in Commerce, can draw all the Wealth of its Colonies into its own Stock? And has not the whole Trade of *North-America*, that growing Magazine of Wealth, been, from the Beginning, directed, restrained, and prohibited at the sole Pleasure of the Parliament? And whatever some may pretend, his Majesty's American Subjects are far from a Desire to invade the just Rights of *Great-Britain*, in all commercial Regulations. They humbly conceive, that a very manifest Distinction presents itself, which, while it leaves to the Mother Country an incontestible Power, to give Laws for the Advancement of her own Commerce, will, at the same Time, do no Violence to the Rights of the Plantations.

The Authority of the Parliament of *Great-Britain*, to model the Trade of the whole Empire, so as to subserve the Interest of her own, we are ready to recognize in the most extensive and positive Terms. Such a Preference is naturally founded upon her Superiority, and indissolubly connected with the Principle of Self-Preservation.— And therefore, to assign one Instance, instead of many, the Colonies cannot, would not ask for a Licence to import woolen Manufactures from *France*; or to go into the most lucrative Branches of Commerce, in the least Degree incompatible with the Trade and Interest of *Great-Britain*.

But a Freedom to drive all Kinds of Traffick in a Subordination to, and not inconsistent with, the *British* Trade; and an Exemption from all Duties in such a Course of Commerce, is humbly claimed by the Colonies, as the most essential of all the Rights to which they are intitled, as Colonists from, and connected, in the

common Bond of Liberty, with the unenslaved Sons of *Great-Britain*.

For, with Submission, since all Impositions, whether they be internal Taxes, or Duties paid, for what we consume, equally diminish the Estates upon which they are charged; what avails it to any People, by which of them they are impoverished? Every Thing will be given up to preserve Life; and though there is a Diversity in the Means, yet, the whole Wealth of a Country may be as effectually drawn off, by the Exaction of Duties, as by any other Tax upon their Estates.

And therefore, the General Assembly of *New-York*, in Fidelity to their Constituents, cannot but express the most earnest Supplication, that the Parliament will charge our Commerce with no other Duties, than a necessary Regard to the particular Trade of *Great-Britain*, evidently demands; but leave it to the legislative Power of the Colony, to impose all other Burthens upon it's own People, which the publick Exigences may require.

Latterly, the Laws of Trade seem to have been framed without an Attention to this fundamental Claim.

Permit us, also, in Defence of our Attachment to the Mother Country, to add, what your Merchants (to whom we boldly make the Appeal) know to be an undoubted Truth; that this Continent contains some of the *most useful* of her Subjects.— Such is the Nature of our Produce, that all we acquire is less than sufficient to purchase what we want of your Manufactures; and, be the Policy of your Commerce what it will, all our Riches must flow into *Great-Britain*.— Immense have been our Contributions to the National Stock.— Our Staple, Industry, Trade and Wealth, all conduce to the particular Advantage of our fellow Subjects there.— The natural State of this Country, necessarily forms the Ballance of Trade in her Favour.— Her growing Opulence must elevate her above all Fear and Jealousy of these Dependences. How much stronger then the

Reasons for leaving us free from ungranted Impositions? Whoever will give full Scope to his Meditations on this Topic, will see it the Interest of *Great-Britain*, to adopt the Maxim, that her own Happiness is most intimately connected with the Freedom, Ease and Prosperity of her Colonies: The more extensive our Traffick, the Greater her Gains; we carry all to her Hive, and consume the Returns; and we are content with any constitutional Regulation that enriches her, though it impoverishes ourselves. But a fuller Display of these Principles, being prepared by our Merchants, to be laid before the honourable House, at the last Sitting, we shall only beg Leave to add, that any Information, repugnant to this Account of the low State of our Traffick, must proceed from partial, or incompetent Witnesses; who may have formed their Estimate of the Wealth of the Colony, during the late War, when the *French* and *Spanish West-Indies*, were laid open to our Trade, and those immense Profits acquired there, for the Manufactures of *Great-Britain* and *Ireland*, flowed into the Colonies, and Luxury advanced upon us slower than our Gains.— But Trade being now confined to it's old Channels, and indeed still more restricted, and the late acquired Cash, remitted home for necessary Cloathing, other very indifferent Appearances begin to take place, and the *British* Merchants are, or will soon be convinced to their Sorrow, that our Splendor was not supported by solid Riches.

The honourable House will permit us to observe next, that the Act of the last Session of Parliament, inhibiting all Inter-course between the Continent and the foreign Sugar Colonies, will prove equally detrimental to us and *Great-Britain*.— That Trade, gave a value to a vast, but now alas unsaleable Staple, which being there converted into Cash and Merchandize, made necessary Remittances for the *British* Manufactures we consumed:— The same Law contains a Clause unfriend-

ly to the Linen Manufactory in *Ireland*, for the Restraint upon the Exportation of Lumber to that Kingdom, prevents even our dunnaging the Flax-Seed Casks sent there with Staves.— And when we consider the Wisdom of our Ancestors in contriving Trials by Juries, we cannot stifle our Regret, that the Laws of Trade in general, change the Current of Justice from the common Law, and subject Controversies of the utmost Importance to the Decisions of the Vice-Admiralty Courts, who proceed not according the old wholesom Laws of the Land, nor are always filled with Judges of approved Knowledge and Integrity.— To this Objection, the aforementioned Statute will at first View appear to be so evidently open, that we shall content ourselves with barely suggesting, that the amazing Confidence it reposes in the Judges, gives great Grief to his Majesty's *American* Subjects; and pass on to a few Remarks on that other Law of the same Session, which renders our Paper Money no legal Tender.

The Use of this Sort of Currency in procuring a speedy Supply on Emergences, all the Colonies have often experienced.— We have had Recourse to this Expedient in every War, since the Reign of King *William* the Third; and without it we could not have co-operated so vigorously in the Reduction of *Canada*, that grand stroke which secured to *Great-Britain*, the immense Dominion of the Continent of *North-America*. We had no other Alternative but *that*, or the taking up Money upon Loan, Lenders could not have been easily found, and if they were, the Interest upon all the Sums raised in that Way, would have exceeded our Ability now to discharge. Happy for us, therefore, that we fell upon the Project of giving a Credit to Paper, which was always supported by seasonable Taxes on our Estates; the Currency of the Bills being prolonged only till we were able to burn up the Quantity from Time to Time emitted.— Our Laws, or the Copies transmitted to the Plantation

Office, will evince that of the numerous Emissions we have made since the first, which was on the 8th of *June*, 1709, all were for the urgent Service of the Crown.— One Instance is so recent, and shews the Necessity of the Continuation of such a Power in the Colonies, in so striking a Point of Light, that it deserves more particular Notice. The Operations of the Year 1759, were nearly at a Stand for want of Money. The military Chest being exhausted, the General was alarmed, and seeing no other Method to ward of the impending Disaster, was obliged to ask the Colony for a Loan of *One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Pounds*: We immediately gratified his Request. —Such was our Concern for the publick Weal! We wish his Majesty's Service may suffer no Impediment, by this new Restraint in an Article which has been of so much Utility.— The Traffick of the Colony certainly will, for want of a competent Medium; and on that Account, and in behalf of those miserable Debtors, whose Estates, through the Scarcity of legal Cash, must be extended by Executions, and hastily sold beneath their true Value, to the Ruin of many Families, permit us to implore your tender Commiseration.

The General Assembly of this Colony have no desire to derogate from the Power of the Parliament of *Great-Britain*; but they cannot avoid deprecating the Loss of such Rights as they have hitherto enjoyed, Rights established in the first Dawn of our Constitution, founded upon the most substantial Reasons, confirmed by invariable Usage, conducive to the best Ends; never abused to bad Purposes, and with the Loss of which Liberty, Property, and all the Benefits of Life, tumble into Insecurity and Ruin: Rights, the Deprivation of which, will dispirit the People, abate their Industry, discourage Trade, introduce Discord, Poverty and Slavery; or, by depopulating the Colonies, turn a vast, fertile, prosperous Region, into a dreary Wilderness; impoverish *Great-*



*Britain*, and shake the Power and Independancy of the most opulent and flourishing Empire in the World.

All which your Petitioners (who repose the highest Confidence in your Wisdom and Justice) humbly pray, may be now taken into your seasonable Consideration, and such Measures pursued, as the

Event may prove to have been concerted for the Common-Weal, of all the Subjects of *Great-Britain*, both at home and abroad.

By Order of the General Assembly,  
Wm. Nicoll, *Speaker*.  
*Assembly-Chamber*,  
*City of New-York*,  
Oct. 18, 1764.

### 3. The Virginia Petitions to the King and Parliament, December 18, 1764

#### A. THE PETITION TO THE KING

[J. P. Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1761-1765* (Richmond, 1907), 302.]

To the King's Most Excellent Majesty.  
Most gracious Sovereign,

We your Majesty's dutiful and loyal Subjects, the Council and Burgesses of your ancient Colony and Dominion of *Virginia*, now met in General Assembly, beg Leave to assure your Majesty of our firm and inviolable Attachment to your sacred Person and Government; and as your faithful Subjects here have at all Times been zealous to demonstrate this Truth, by a ready Compliance with the Royal Requisitions during the late War, by which a heavy and oppressive Debt of near Half a Million hath been incurred, so at this Time they implore Permission to approach the Throne with humble Confidence, and to intreat that your Majesty will be graciously pleased to protect your People of this Colony in the Enjoyment of their ancient and inestimable Right of being governed by such Laws respecting their internal Polity and Taxation as are

derived from their own Consent, with the Approbation of their Sovereign or his Substitute: A Right which as Men, and Descendents of *Britons*, they have ever quietly possessed since first by Royal Permission and Encouragement they left the Mother Kingdom to extend its Commerce and Dominion.

Your Majesty's dutiful Subjects of *Virginia* most humbly and unanimously hope that this invaluable Birthright, descended to them from their Ancestors, and in which they have been protected by your Royal Predecessors, will not be suffered to receive an Injury under the Reign of your Sacred Majesty, already so illustriously distinguished by your gracious Attention to the Liberties of the People.

That your Majesty may long live to make Nations happy is the ardent Prayer of your faithful Subjects, the Council and Burgesses of *Virginia*.

#### B. THE MEMORIAL TO THE HOUSE OF LORDS

[Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1761-1765*, 302.]

To the Right Honourable the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament assembled: The Memorial of the Council and Burgesses of *Virginia*, now met in General Assembly,

Humbly represents,

That your Memorialists hope on Application to your Lordships, the fixed and hereditary Guardians of *British* Liberty, will not be thought improper at this Time,

when Measures are proposed subversive, as they conceive, of that Freedom which all Men, especially those who derive their Constitution from *Britain*, have a Right to enjoy; and they flatter themselves that your Lordships will not look upon them as Objects so unworthy your Attention as to regard any Impropriety in the Form or Manner of their Application, for your Lordships Protection of their just and undoubted Rights as *Britons*.

It cannot be Presumption in your Memorialists to call themselves by this distinguished Name, since they are descended from *Britons* who left their native Country to extend its Territory and Dominion, and who happily for *Britain*, and as your Memorialists once thought for themselves too, effected this Purpose. As our Ancestors brought with them every Right and Privilege they could with Justice claim in their Mother Kingdom, their Descendants may conclude they cannot be deprived of those Rights without Injustice.

Your Memorialists conceive it to be a fundamental Principle of the *British* Constitution, without which Freedom can no Where exist, that the People are not subject to any Taxes but such as are laid on them by their own Consent, or by those who are legally appointed to represent them: Property must become too precarious for the Genius of a free People which can be taken from them at the Will of others, who cannot know what Taxes such People can bear, or the easiest Mode of raising them; and who are not under that Restraint, which is the greatest Security against a burthensome Taxation, when the Representatives themselves must be affected by every Tax imposed on the People.

Your Memorialists are therefore led into an humble Confidence that your Lordships will not think any Reason sufficient to support such a Power in the *British* Parliament, where the Colonies cannot be represented; a Power never before constitutionally assumed, and which if they

have a Right to exercise on any Occasion must necessarily establish this melancholy Truth, that the Inhabitants of the Colonies are the Slaves of *Britons*, from whom they are descended, and from whom they might expect every Indulgence that the Obligations of Interest and Affection can entitle them to.

Your Memorialists have been invested with the Right of taxing their own People from the first Establishment of a regular Government in the Colony, and Requisitions have been constantly made to them by their Sovereigns on all Occasions when the Assistance of the Colony was thought necessary to preserve the *British* Interest in America; from whence they must conclude they cannot now be deprived of a Right they have so long enjoyed, and which they have never forfeited.

The Expenses incurred during the last War, in Compliance with the Demands on this Colony by our late and present most gracious Sovereigns, have involved us in a Debt of near Half a Million; a Debt not likely to decrease under the continued Expense we are at in providing for the Security of the People against the Incur-sions of our savage Neighbours, at a Time when the low state of our Staple Commodity, the total Want of Specie, and the late Restrictions upon the Trade of the Colonies, render the Circumstances of the People extremely distressful, and which, if Taxes are accumulated upon them by the *British* Parliament, will make them truly deplorable.

Your Memorialists cannot suggest to themselves any Reason why they should not still be trusted with the Property of their People, with whose Abilities, and the least burthensome Mode of taxing (with great Deference to the superior Wisdom of Parliament) they must be best acquainted.

Your Memorialist hope they shall not be suspected of being actuated on this Occasion by any Principles but those of the purest Loyalty and Affection as they

always endeavoured by their Conduct to demonstrate that they consider their Connexions with *Great Britain*, the Seat of Liberty, as their greatest Happiness.

The Duty they owe to themselves and their Posterity lays your Memorialists under the Necessity of endeavouring to estab-

lish their Constitution upon its proper Foundation; and they do most humbly pray your Lordships to take this Subject into your Consideration with the Attention that is due to the Well being of the Colonies, on which the Prosperity of *Great Britain* does in a great Measure depend.

### C. THE REMONSTRANCE TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

[Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1761-1765*, 303-4.]

To the Honourable the Knights, Citizens, and Burgesses of *Great Britain*, in Parliament assembled:

The Remonstrance of the Council and Burgesses of *Virginia*.

It appearing by the printed Votes of the House of Commons of *Great Britain* in Parliament assembled that in a Committee of the whole House, the 17th Day of *March* last, it was resolved that towards defending, protecting, and securing the *British* Colonies and Plantations in *America*, it may be proper to charge certain Stamp Duties in the said Colonies and Plantations; and it being apprehended that the same Subject, which was then declined, may be resumed and further pursued in a succeeding Session, the Council and Burgesses of *Virginia*, met in General Assembly, judge it their indispensable Duty, in a respectful Manner, but with decent Firmness, to remonstrate against such a Measure, that at least a cession of those Rights, which in their Opinion must be infringed by that Procedure, may not be inferred from their Silence, at so important a Crisis.

They conceive it is essential to *British* Liberty that Laws imposing Taxes on the People ought not to be made without the Consent of Representatives chosen by themselves; who, at the same Time that they are acquainted with the Circumstances of their Constituents, sustain a Proportion of the Burthen laid on them. This Privilege, inherent in the Persons who discovered and settled these Regions, could not be renounced or forfeited by their

Removal hither, not as Vagabonds or Fugitives, but licensed and encouraged by their Prince and animated with a laudable Desire of enlarging the *British* Dominion, and extending its Commerce: On the contrary, it was secured to them and their Descendants, with all other Rights and Immunities of *British* Subjects, by a Royal Charter, which hath been invariably recognised and confirmed by his Majesty and his Predecessors in their Commissions to the several Governours, granting a Power, and prescribing a Form of Legislation; according to which, Laws for the Administration of Justice, and for the Welfare and good Government of the Colony, have been hitherto enacted by the Governour, Council, and General Assembly, and to them Requisitions and Applications for Supplies have been directed by the Crown. As an Instance of the Opinion which former Sovereigns entertained of these Rights and Privileges, we beg Leave to refer to three Acts of the General Assembly passed in the 32d Year of the Reign of King Charles II (one of which is entitled *An Act for raising a Publick Revenue for the better Support of the Government of his Majesty's Colony of Virginia*, imposing several Duties for that Purpose) which they thought absolutely necessary, were prepared in *England*, and sent over by their then Governour, the Lord *Culpeper*, to be passed by the General Assembly, with a full Power to give the Royal Assent thereto; and which were accordingly passed, after several

Amendments were made to them here: Thus tender was his Majesty of the Rights of his *American* Subjects; and the Remonstrants do not discern by what Distinction they can be deprived of that sacred Birth-right and most valuable Inheritance by their Fellow Subjects, nor with what Propriety they can be taxed or affected in their Estates by the Parliament, wherein they are not, and indeed cannot, constitutionally be represented.

And if it were proper for the Parliament to impose Taxes on the Colonies at all, which the Remonstrants take Leave to think would be inconsistent with the fundamental Principles of the Constitution, the Exercise of that Power at this Time would be ruinous to *Virginia*, who exerted herself in the late War it is feared beyond her Strength, insomuch that to redeem the Money granted for that Exigence her People are taxed for several Years to come: This, with the large Expenses incurred for defending the Frontiers against the restless *Indians*, who have infested her as much since the Peace as before, is so grievous that an Increase of the Burthen will be intolerable; especially as the People are very greatly distressed already from the Scarcity of circulating Cash amongst them, and from the little Value of their Staple at the *British* Markets.

And it is presumed that adding to that Load which the Colony now labours under will not be more oppressive to her People than destructive of the Interests of *Great Britain*: For the Plantation Trade, confined as it is to the Mother Country, hath been a principal Means of multiplying and enriching her Inhabitants; and, if not too much discouraged, may prove an inex-

haustible Source of Treasure to the Nation. For Satisfaction in this Point, let the present State of the *British* Fleets and Trade be compared with what they were before the Settlement of the Colonies; and let it be considered that whilst Property in Land may be acquired on very easy Terms, in the vast uncultivated Territory of *North America*, the Colonists will be mostly, if not wholly, employed in Agriculture; whereby the Exportation of their Commodities of *Great Britain*, and the Consumption of their Manufactures supplied from thence, will be daily increasing. But this most desirable Connexion between *Great Britain* and her Colonies, supported by such a happy Intercourse of reciprocal Benefits as is continually advancing the Prosperity of both, must be interrupted, if the People of the latter, reduced to extreme Poverty, should be compelled to manufacture those Articles they have been hitherto furnished with from the former.

From these Considerations, it is hoped that the Honourable House of Commons will not prosecute a Measure which those who may suffer under it cannot but look upon as fitter for Exiles driven from their native Country after ignominiously forfeiting her Favours and Protection, than for the Prosperity of *Britons* who have at all Times been forward to demonstrate all due Reverence to the Mother Kingdom, and are so instrumental in promoting her Glory and Felicity; and that *British* Patriots will never consent to the Exercise of anticonstitutional Power, which even in this remote Corner may be dangerous in its Example to the interior Parts of the *British* Empire, and will certainly be detrimental to its Commerce.

## 65. An American Reaction

[George Mason to the Committee of London Merchants, June 6, 1766, Kate Mason Rowland, *The Life of George Mason, 1725-1792* (New York, 1892), I, 381-89.]

Virginia, Potomack River  
June 6th, 1766

GENTLEMEN:

There is a letter of yours dated the 20th of February last, lately printed in the public papers here, which, though addressed to a particular set of men, seems

intended for the colonies in general; and, being upon a very interesting subject, I shall, without further preface or apology, exercise the right of a freeman in making such remarks upon it as I think proper.

The epithets of parent and child have been so long applied to Great Britain and

her colonies, that individuals have adopted them, and we rarely see anything from your side of the water free from the authoritative style of a master to a school-boy:

"We have with infinite difficulty and fatigue got you excused this one time; pray be a good boy for the future, do what your papa and mama bid you, and hasten to return them your most grateful acknowledgements for condescending to let you keep what is your own; and then all your acquaintance will love you, and praise you, and give you pretty things; and if you should at any time hereafter happen to transgress, your friends will all beg for you, and be security for your good behaviour; but if you are a naughty boy, and turn obstinate, and don't mind what your papa and mama say to you, but presume to think their commands (let them be what they will) unjust or unreasonable, or even seem to ascribe their present indulgence to any other motive than excess of moderation and tenderness, and pretend to judge for yourselves, when you are not arrived at the years of discretion, or capable of distinguishing between good and evil; then everybody will hate you, and say you are a graceless and undutiful child; your parents and masters will be obliged to whip you severely, and your friends will be ashamed to say anything in your excuse: nay, they will be blamed for your faults. See your work—see what you have brought the child to. If he had been well scourged at first for opposing our absolute will and pleasure, and daring to think he had any such thing as property of his own, he would not have had the impudence to repeat the crime."

"My dear child, we have laid the alternative fairly before you, you can't hesitate in the choice, and we doubt not you will observe such a conduct as your friends recommend."

Is not this a little ridiculous, when applied to three millions of as loyal and useful subjects as any in the British do-

minions, who have been only contending for their birth-right, and have now only gained, or rather kept, what could not, with common justice, or even policy, be denied them? But setting aside the manner, let me seriously consider the substance and subject of your letter.

Can the honor of parliament be maintained by persisting in a measure evidently wrong? Is it any reflection upon the honor of parliament to show itself wiser this year than the last, to have profited by experience, and to correct the errors which time and indubitable evidence have pointed out?

If the Declaratory Act, or Vote of Right, has asserted any unjust, oppressive, or unconstitutional principles, to become "waste paper" would be the most innocent use that could be made of it; by the copies we have seen here, the legislative authority of Great Britain is fully and positively asserted in all cases whatsoever. But a just and necessary distinction between legislation and taxation hath been made by the greatest and wisest men in the nation; so that if the right to the latter had been disclaimed, it would not have impeached or weakened the vote of right; on the contrary, it would have strengthened it, for nothing (except hanging the author of the Stamp Act) would have contributed more to restore that confidence which a weak or corrupt ministry had so greatly impaired.

We do not deny the supreme authority of Great Britain over her colonies; but it is a power which a wise legislature will exercise with extreme tenderness and caution, and carefully avoid the least imputation or suspicion of partiality. Would to God that this always had been, that it always may be the case! To make an odious distinction between us and our fellow-subjects residing in Great Britain, by depriving us of the ancient trial, by a jury of our equals, and substituting in its place an arbitrary civil-law court—to put it in the power of every sycophant and

informer ("the most mischievous, wicked, abandoned and profligate race," says an eminent writer upon British politics, "that ever God permitted to plague mankind") to drag a freeman a thousand miles from his own country (whereby he may be deprived of the benefit of evidence) to defend his property before a judge, who, from the nature of his office, is a creature of the ministry, liable to be displaced at their pleasure, whose interest it is to encourage informers, as his income may in a great measure depend upon his condemnations, and to give such a judge a power of excluding the most innocent man, thus treated, from any remedy (even the recovery of his costs) by only certifying that *in his opinion* there was a *probable* cause of complaint; and thus to make the property of the subject, in a matter which may reduce him from opulence to indigence, depend upon a word before unknown in the language and style of laws! Are these among the instances that call for our expression of "filial gratitude to our parent-country"? These things did not altogether depend upon the stamp act, and therefore are not repealed with it.

Can the foundations of the state be sapped and the body of the people remain unaffected? Are the inhabitants of Great Britain absolutely certain that, in the ministry or parliament of a future day, such incroachments will not be urged as precedents against themselves? Is the indulgence of Great Britain manifested by prohibiting her colonies from exporting to foreign countries such commodities as she does not want, and from importing such as she does not produce or manufacture, and therefore cannot furnish but upon extravagant terms? One of your own writers (I think it is Bishop Burnet) relates a remarkable piece of tyranny of the priesthood in Italy: "They make it an article of religion," says he, "for the people to mix water with their wine in the press, by which it is soured; so that the laity cannot drink a drop of good wine, unless they

buy it from the convents, at whatever price the clergy think fit to set upon it." I forbear to make the application.

Let our fellow-subjects in Great Britain reflect that we are descended from the same stock with themselves, nurtured in the same principles of freedom; which we have both sucked in with our mother's milk; that in crossing the Atlantic Ocean, we have only changed our climate, not our minds, our natures and dispositions remain unaltered; that we are still the same people with them in every respect; only not yet debauched by wealth, luxury, venality and corruption; and then they will be able to judge how the late regulations have been relished in America.

You need not, gentlemen, be afraid of our "breaking out into intemperate strains of triumph and exaltation"; there is yet no cause that our joy should exceed the bounds of moderation.

If we are ever so unfortunate [as] to be made slaves, which God avert! what matter is it to us whether our chains are forged in London or at Constantinople? Whether the oppression comes from a British parliament or a Turkish divan?

You tell us that "our task-masters will probably be restored." Do you mean the stamp officers, or the stamp ministry? If the first, the treatment they have already found here will hardly make them fond of returning. If the latter, we despise them too much to fear them. They have sufficiently exposed their own ignorance, malice and impotence. The cloven foot has been too plainly seen to be again concealed; they have rendered themselves as obnoxious to Great Britain as to America.

If the late ministerial party could have influenced the legislature to have made so cruel and dangerous an experiment as attempting to enforce the stamp-act by military power, would the nation have engaged heartily in such an execrable cause? Would there have been no difficulty in raising and transporting a body of troops sufficient to occupy a country of more

than two thousand miles in extent? Would they have had no dangers to encounter in the woods and wilds of America? Three millions of people driven to desperation are not an object of contempt. America, however weak in herself, adds greatly to the strength of Great Britain; which would be diminished in proportion by her loss; with prudent management she might become an impenetrable bulwark to the British Nation, and almost enable it to stand before the stroke of time.

Say there was not a possibility of failing in the project, what then would have been the consequence? Could you have destroyed us without ruining yourselves? The trade of Great Britain is carried on and supported principally by credit. If the American merchant [i.e., London merchants trading to America] has an hundred thousand pounds due to him in the colonies, he must owe near as much to his woolen-draper, his linen-draper, his grocer, &c., and these again are indebted to the manufacturer, and so on; there is no determinate end to this commercial chain; break but one link of it and the whole is destroyed. Make a bankrupt of the merchant by stopping his remittances from America, and you strike at the credit of every man who has connections with him; there is no knowing where the contagion would stop. You would overturn one another like a set of ninepins. The value of your lands and produce would fall, your manufacturers would starve for want of employment, your funds might fail, your public credit sink, and let but the bubble once burst, where is the man who could undertake to blow it up again?

These evils are for the present removed. Praised be Almighty God! Blessed be our most gracious sovereign! Thanks to the present mild and prudent temper of parliament. Thanks to the wise and honest conduct of the present administration. Thanks to the unwearied diligence of our friends, the British merchants and manufacturers;

thanks to that happy circumstance of their private interest being so interwoven with ours that they could not be separated. Thanks to the spirited and disinterested conduct of our own merchants in the northern colonies, who deserve to have their names handed down with reverence and gratitude to posterity. Thanks to the unanimity of the colonies themselves. And many thanks to our generous and able benefactor, Mr. Pitt, who has always stood forth a champion in the cause of liberty and his country. No thanks to Mr. Grenville and his party, who, without his genius or abilities, has dared to act the part that Pericles did, when he engaged his country in the Peloponnesian War, which, after a long and dreadful scene of blood, ended in the ruin of all Greece, and fitted it for the Macedonian yoke.

Some bungler in politics will soon, perhaps, be framing schemes for restraining our manufactures—vain attempt. Our land is cheap and fresh; we have more of it than we are able to employ; while we can live in ease and plenty upon our farms, tillage and not arts will engage our attention. If, by opening the channels of trade, you afford us a ready market for the produce of our lands, and an opportunity of purchasing cheap the conveniences of life, all our superfluous gain will sink into your pockets, in return for British manufactures. If the trade of this continent with the French and Spaniards, in their sugar islands, had not been restrained, Great Britain would soon have undersold them, with their own produce, in every market of the world. Until you lay us under a necessity of shifting for ourselves, you need not be afraid of the manufactures of America. The ancient poets, in their elegant manner of expression, have made a kind of being of necessity, and tell us that the gods themselves are obliged to yield to her.

It is by invitations and indulgence, not by compulsion, that the market for British manufactures is to be kept up and in-



creased in America: without the first you will find the latter as ineffectual, as destructive of the end it aims at, as persecution in matters of religion; which serves not to extinguish but to confirm the heresy. There is a passion natural to the mind of man, especially a free man, which renders him impatient of restraint. Do you, does any sensible man think that three or four millions of people, not naturally defective in genius, or in courage, who have tasted the sweets of liberty, in a country that doubles its inhabitants every twenty years, in a country abounding in such variety of soil and climate, capable of producing, not only the necessaries, but the conveniences and delicacies of life, will long submit to oppression; if unhappily for yourselves oppression should be offered them? Such another experiment as the stamp-act would produce a general revolt in America.

Do you think that all your rival powers in Europe would sit still and see you crush your once flourishing and thriving colonies, unconcerned spectators of such a quarrel? Recollect what happened in the Low Countries a century or two ago. Call to mind the cause of the revolt. Call to mind, too, the part that England herself then acted. The same causes will generally produce the same effects; and it requires no great degree of penetration to foretell that what has happened may happen again.

—“If I could find example  
Of thousands that by bare submission  
had  
Preserv'd their freedom, I'd not do 't;  
but since  
Nor brass, nor stone, nor parchment  
bears not one;  
Let cowardice itself forswear it.”

God forbid there should be occasion, and grant that the union, liberty and mutual happiness of Great Britain and her colonies may continue uninterrupted to the latest ages!

America has always acknowledged her dependence upon Great Britain. It is her

interest, it is her inclination to depend upon Great Britain. We readily own that these colonies were first settled, not at the expence but under the protection of the English government; which protection it has continued to afford them; and we own, too, that protection and allegiance are reciprocal duties. If it is asked at whose expence they were settled, the answer is obvious—at the expence of the private adventurers, our ancestors; the fruit of whose toil and danger we now enjoy. We claim nothing but the liberty and privileges of Englishmen, in the same degree, as if we had still continued among our brethren in Great Britain; these rights have not been forfeited by any act of ours; we cannot be deprived of them, without our consent, but by violence and injustice; we have received them from our ancestors, and, with God's leave, we will transmit them, unimpaired, to our posterity. Can those who have hitherto acted as our friends, endeavour now, insidiously to draw from us concessions destructive to what we hold far dearer than life?

Our laws, our language, our principles of government, our intermarriages, and other connections, our constant intercourse, and above all our interest, are so many bands which hold us to Great Britain, not to be broken but by tyranny and oppression. Strange that among the late ministry there should not be found a man of common sense and common honesty, to improve and strengthen these natural ties by a mild and just government, instead of weakening and almost dissolving them by partiality and injustice! But I will not open the wounds which have been so lately bound up, and which still require a skilful and a gentle hand to heal them.

These are the sentiments of a man who spends most of his time in retirement, and has seldom meddled in public affairs, who enjoys a moderate but independent fortune, and, content with the blessings of a private station, equally disregards the smiles and frowns of the great; who, though not born

within the verge of the British Isle, is an Englishman in his principles, a zealous assertor of the Act of Settlement, firmly attached to the present royal family upon the throne, unalienably affected to his Majesty's sacred person and government, in the defence of which he would shed the last drop of his blood; who looks upon Jacobitism as the most absurd infatuation, the wildest chimera that ever entered into the head of man; who adores the wisdom and happiness of the British Constitution; and if he had his election now to make, would prefer it to any that does or ever did exist. I am not singular in this my political creed; these are the general principles of his Majesty's subjects in America; they are the principles of more than nine-tenths of the people who have been so basely misrepresented to you, and whom

you would lately have treated as rebels and outlaws, a people to whom you can never grant too much, because you can hardly give them anything which will not redound to the benefit of the giver.

If any person should think it worth his while to animadvert upon what I have written, I shall make no reply. I have neither ability nor inclination to turn author. If the maxims I have asserted and the reflections I have made are in themselves just, they will need no vindication; if they are erroneous, I shall esteem it a favour to have my errors pointed out, and will, in modest silence, kiss the rod that corrects me.

I am, Gentlemen, your most obedient servant,

A VIRGINIA PLANTER.