Between Slavery and Freedom:
Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution

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The American Revolution was a social and economic upheaval of cataclysmic proportions. Its disruptive and destructive effects were more profoundly felt in the South than anywhere else in the country. In part this was due to prolonged conventional operations there, but it was also due to the ferocious fratricidal war that distinguished the Revolution in the South. In states such as Virginia, with a high concentration of enslaved people, the disorder endemic to the war awakened chronic white fears of a general servile uprising. Although slave unrest was widespread, no revolt by force of arms occurred. The fact that North American slaves were less “conspicuously rebellious” in the Revolutionary era than were slaves in the British Caribbean has concerned a number of historians. One scholar views the absence of any massive revolt as the result of changes in the southern labor force during the first half of the eighteenth century: the shift from free, independent labor to slave labor; from a free, depressed lower class of potentially armed and dangerous men to a totally oppressed, permanently enslaved labor force with “no hope, no rising expectations, and no arms.” A more recent study contends that the North American plantation organization, with the dominating presence of the master, inhibited the development of the tribal cohesiveness that characterized the islands’ plantation organization.


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and produced widespread violence against whites by black guerrilla bands.\(^3\)

The purpose of this essay is first to suggest that the absence of any major slave revolts in Virginia and elsewhere in the South during the Revolutionary era should not obscure the high degree of resistance to slavery that existed there. Secondly, it is to argue that to a far greater extent than is generally recognized the actions of both belligerents discouraged large-scale insurrections. In his classic work *The Negro in the American Revolution* Benjamin Quarles maintains that “The number of Negroes who fled to the British ran into the tens of thousands.”\(^4\) Contemporary estimates of total slave losses in the South ran as high as 55,000,\(^5\) although estimates of individual state losses taken together are considerably higher even than that. The Revolutionary War’s historian, David Ramsay, for example, claimed that South Carolina alone lost 25,000 slaves.\(^6\) Jefferson calculated Virginia’s fugitives to be “30,000 in the one year of 1778.”\(^7\) The lack of hard statistics makes it impossible to ascertain precisely how many Virginia slaves “voted with their feet” by defecting to the British. But Virginia’s slave population of about one-quarter million was concentrated in the Tidewater section of the state most ravaged by war. Good evidence from widely scattered sources, both British and American, strongly suggests that Jefferson’s estimates of slave losses might in fact be reliable.

Long before the British tendered their help, blacks began defecting to them in the mistaken belief that the British view of slavery was substantially different from that of most Virginia planters. Late in 1774, for example, “a few of those unhappy wretches” met together and selected a leader “who was to conduct them when the English troops should arrive.” According to James Madison, who reported the conspiracy to William Bradford, the slaves expected freedom in exchange for their defection. Their plans were, however, “discovered and proper precautions taken to prevent the Infection.” Fearing its disruptive effect, Madison closed with a warning that “It is prudent such things should be concealed as well as suppressed.”\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, Va., 1965), 219.

\(^8\) To William Bradford, November 26, 1774, William T. Hutchinson, William M. Rachal, *et
But blacks continued to flock to the British. The arrival in Norfolk in July 1775 of British troops from St. Augustine produced “exceeding bad effects” upon the blacks in the area.9 Disturbed over the “elopement” of their slaves to the men of war, a deputation from the borough of Norfolk waited upon Captain John McCartney, commanding officer of the Mercury, and Matthew Squire, commanding the Otter.10 Despite repeated assurances from both officers that no encouragement would be given runaways, numbers of slaves, individually and in pairs, fled to the war craft and were welcomed on board. Inhabitants near Elizabeth City County were particularly incensed at Captain Squire for harboring and employing the slaves who came to him while the Otter lay in the York River. By September it was painfully clear to the inhabitants of Norfolk and Elizabeth City counties that the British naval force had not only welcomed slaves who came to them, but in some instances had seized and carried away several free blacks.11

Moreover, although Governor John Murray, fourth Earl of Dunmore, had not as yet openly invited a slave rebellion, he had secret plans to do so. The suspicions held by the rebellious planters that the governor was “tampering with the Slaves and that he has it in contemplation to make great use of them in case of a civil war in this province,”12 were in fact well founded. In a letter to the Earl of Dartmouth written in March reporting on the gunpowder affair Dunmore announced his intention to “arm all my own Negroes and receive all others that will come to me whom I shall declare free.” Properly armed, he boasted, his force would soon “reduce the refractory people of this Colony to obedience.”13

In August the officers of the American volunteer companies in Williamsburg informed the Virginia convention that “The Governor’s Cutter has carried off a number of Slaves belonging to private gentlemen[.]”14 Moved perhaps by the officers’ urgings that it was “high

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9 Norfolk Borough Committee to Peyton Randolph, July 31, 1775, Robert L. Scribner and Brent Tarter, eds., Revolutionary Virginia. The Road to Independence (6 vols. to date, Charlottesville, 1973-), III, 378.
10 Virginia Gazette (Dixon and Hunter), August 5, 1775.
11 Norfolk Borough Committee to Randolph, July 31, 1775; Virginia Committee of Safety at Williamsburg, October 24, 1775, Scribner and Tarter, eds., Revolutionary Virginia, III, 378; IV, 269.
14 Officers to the President and Gentlemen of the Convention, Scribner and Tarter, eds., Revolutionary Virginia, III, 385.
[time] to establish the doctrine of repraisal [sic] & to take immediate possession (if possible of his person) at all events of his property,”¹⁵ the Virginia Committee of Safety ordered Colonel William Woodford to lead his own regiment and five companies of minutemen to Norfolk to protect and defend “the persons and properties of all friends to the cause of America.”¹⁶ Dunmore's military operations in Virginia in the following months have been so frequently described and at such length that a detailed account here is unnecessary. For nearly a year he led or ordered spoiling operations along Virginia's waterways, causing considerably more fear than havoc. After several minor clashes with militiamen, Dunmore declared martial law on November 7, 1775. Shortly afterwards he issued his famous proclamation from on board the William, which he had seized from local merchants and fitted out for war. Directed principally at “all indented Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) . . . that are able and willing to bear Arms,”¹⁷ Dunmore's proclamation was designed to encourage the defection of useful blacks without provoking a general rebellion.

It has been estimated that no more than eight hundred slaves were able to reach Dunmore. That figure is probably low. For nearly a year Dunmore's small tenders plied Virginia's rivers, “Plundering plantations and using every Art to seduce the Negroes.”¹⁸ Small bands of his soldiers, most of them black, made frequent sorties on shore to liberate or to seize fellow blacks.¹⁹ Although most of the slaves who deserted to Dunmore fled as individuals or in small groups, there were instances of successful desertion by a plantation's entire slave force. For example, all eighty-seven of John Willoughby's slaves fled his plantation in Norfolk County to join Dunmore.²⁰ Despite heavy losses by death and by capture, when Dunmore abandoned Gwynne's Island in June 1776 he left tents “capable of containing about 700 or 800 men,”²¹ which suggests substantial augmentation by runaways.

After Dunmore's expulsion in August 1776 Virginia was not invaded again for several years, although the Chesapeake was regularly raided by British barges and by privateers. In a coastal raid in

¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Orders for Colonel William Woodford, ibid., IV, 270.
¹⁷ Dunmore's Proclamation, November 7, 1775, ibid., IV, 334.
¹⁹ Virginia Gazette (Dixon and Hunter), December 2, 1775.
February 1777, for example, "British ships in the Bay . . . [took] on board" approximately three hundred blacks from Northumberland, Gloucester, and Lancaster.\(^{22}\) British operations in the bay during the summer of 1777 also stirred up considerable black unrest. In an effort to execute the British strategy of securing the middle colonies by capturing Philadelphia, General Sir William Howe proceeded to the Quaker City by way of Chesapeake Bay. Blacks flocked "down from the interior parts of the country,"\(^{23}\) enticed by British promises of "fine cloaths and other inducements."\(^{24}\) As the British fleet advanced up the bay to Head of Elk in Maryland, eight or ten privates followed in its wake. ". . . they purpose to lie behind the fleet," an observer in Annapolis wrote, ". . . and then run along shore, and into the unguarded rivers, and plunder the inhabitants. Negroes are their chief object, whom they intend to sell in the West Indies."\(^{25}\)

But it was the area of sprawling plantations and extensive slaveholding, situated between the Rappahannock and James rivers, that suffered the most severe losses. In their erratic progress back and forth through the low country British armies commanded by Benedict Arnold, William Phillips, and Charles Cornwallis, second Earl Cornwallis, wreaked economic havoc along the lower James and York rivers and on the shores of the Chesapeake and Potomac. In each of these extended operations the state lost heavily in tobacco, horses, and slaves.\(^{26}\) General Henry Clinton sent an expedition to Virginia from New York in May 1779. Led by Admiral Sir George Collier and General Edward Matthews, this was the first of several water expeditions into the deeply indented Virginia shore. Meeting no opposition at Portsmouth, the two-thousand-man force remained in the area for ten or twelve days, destroying public stores and plundering the inhabitants of livestock and slaves. Using Portsmouth as a center, they sent out raiding parties, one of which burned the town of Suffolk and destroyed thousands of barrels of pork and great quantities of naval stores. After filling twenty-eight transports with an estimated three thousand hogsheads of tobacco, several thousand head of cattle and horses, and one thousand slaves, they hoisted sail and put to sea.\(^{27}\)

\(^{22}\) Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 117.

\(^{23}\) William Paca to Governor Johnson, September 26, 1777, Maryland State Papers, Rainbow Series: Red Books, 4562–1 (Maryland Hall of Records, Annapolis, Md.).

\(^{24}\) Benjamin Rumsey to Governor Johnson, August 27, 1777, *ibid.*, 4561–69.

\(^{25}\) *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), September 26, 1777.


\(^{27}\) Robert Honeyman Diary, June 1, 1779 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.). Honeyman, a Hanover County physician and planter, was a neutral during most of the war. His account of events was apparently gathered from newspapers, rumors, and personal experience but is generally a reliable source. See also *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon
When, later in August, Matthews left Virginia to rejoin Clinton in New York he took with him 518 more blacks, 256 of them men, 135 of them women, and 127 children. Simultaneously with Matthews's operations, British privateers roamed the Potomac, burned the tobacco warehouse and several vessels loaded with tobacco at Wicomico, and carried off a number of slaves and livestock.

Near the end of October a British fleet commanded by General Alexander Leslie entered the capes of Virginia and landed about three thousand men at Portsmouth. Apparently ordered by Clinton to penetrate the Chesapeake Bay to prevent Virginia and Maryland from sending military supplies and troop reinforcements to Horatio Gates's army after the Battle of Camden the expedition lay quietly for three or four weeks in the Portsmouth area, venturing out only as far as Hampton to collect livestock. American observers, by now accustomed to seeing their slaves taken, noted in astonishment that they "behaved with great moderation . . . took nothing but provisions; prohibited all plundering; dismissed the Negroes who came to join them and even gave up some vessels they took in Portsmouth harbour." Finding "something Mysterious in their leaving their Slaves on shore . . . ," Edmund Pendleton speculated that the fleet lacked either the room or the manpower to accommodate them, or else that they had "designs of further Hostility." In fact, the Patriot victory at King's Mountain, which forced Cornwallis to retreat from Charlotte to Winnsboro, and the rapid build-up of Virginia militia to oppose Leslie led to the decision to withdraw Leslie's troops, which were needed to reinforce Cornwallis, and forced Leslie to turn away the slaves who fled to him.

Leslie's fleet had hardly cleared the bay before another fleet entered the Virginia capes on December 30 and soon afterwards sailed up Hampton Roads. Commanded by Benedict Arnold, the 1,600-man force was sent by Clinton to conduct harassing raids. The object of the operation was to aid Cornwallis in North Carolina by burning the Virginia stores that supplied Nathanael Greene and by perhaps forcing Greene to divert some of his troops away from North
Carolina toward Virginia. Reinforced by two thousand men, Arnold began the systematic raiding that devastated James River communities all the way up to Richmond. The primary objective of the expedition was destruction of public stores: rum, tobacco, and arms and ammunition at the foundry at Westover. The secondary objective of Arnold's Virginia operations was plunder.

With no army to oppose it, this small British force seized and destroyed much of the state's resources and carried away a vast amount of booty: flour, leather, war materiel of every description including brigantines, sloops, and schooners loaded with goods of a great value. The area also lost heavily through the flight or seizure of slaves: "The families within ye Sphere of his Action," the Reverend James Madison wrote to his son, "have suffered greatly. Some have lost 40, others 30, every one a considerable Part of their Slaves." In March Major General William Phillips brought another 2,500 men to Virginia to join Arnold's force for a new invasion projected from Portsmouth. The combined force now commanded by Phillips conducted raids of exceptional severity in the low country. Pursuing a policy of systematic devastation, the Phillips-led troops reportedly seized or burned eight thousand hogsheads of tobacco at Petersburg, Osborne, Manchester, and Blandford, greatly disturbing the industry. To fill their need for cavalry and wagon horses, they seized hundreds of horses, producing a desperate scarcity that continued for some time after the war.

As the army advanced up the James River, numbers of slaves, perceiving that freedom was at hand, "flocked to the enemy from all quarters, even from very remote parts . . ." Looking on with a sense of incredulity, Edmund Pendleton observed "so infatuated are these wretches that they continue to go to them, notwithstanding many who have escaped inform others of their ill treatment, those who are not sent off to the West Indies being kept at hard labour upon very short allowance, so as to perish daily." Except for a few
planters who managed to remove their slaves "up the country," most of those who lived along the river's edge lost heavily: "Some lost 30, 40, 50, 60 or 70 Negroes besides their stocks of cattle, sheep and horses." At the end of the war several prominent men from Princess Anne and Norfolk counties submitted a memorial to Commander-in-Chief Guy Carleton requesting his aid in recovering "at least 300 negroes" taken by the army in its operation there. Raids carried on simultaneously in the Potomac up to Alexandria also did considerable damage as the British landed troops on both sides of the river to burn houses, destroy shipping, and steal or entice slaves.

On May 6 Phillips received word from Cornwallis informing him of the earl's intention to abandon North Carolina and inaugurate a campaign in Virginia. Phillips immediately marched to Petersburg to await Cornwallis there but died of a fever five days before the earl arrived. Late in May Cornwallis began the long campaign that ended in Yorktown. Leading a disciplined and mobile army, he covered vast distances, interrupted only by a number of engagements. From Petersburg to Hanover Courthouse, to Old Albemarle Courthouse, north to Richmond, south again to Williamsburg, Jamestown, Suffolk, and Portsmouth, he finally reached Yorktown on August 2.

Faced with the grim prospect of losing all their slaves, white families along the route of Cornwallis's army hastily removed them and their livestock to safer ground. Failure to do so proved for many to be a costly mistake. After the army passed Mattoax near Petersburg William Withers reported to St. George Tucker that Tucker's wife's plantation had lost its work force: "Not any of your Negroes at Mattoax have appeared at Suppy. Your overseer has now only two Hands able to work and one Horse." Worried about bringing in the crops, Withers advised Tucker that "if you have any such as will not go off to the Enemy, I wou'd advise your sending him those. . . ."

Assessing the situation later in August, Withers described conditions as still "greatly distressed" by sickness and desertion among the slaves. In his own cryptic shorthand he told how losses in crops, livestock, and labor were for many planters compounded by "the treachery of the Negroes beyond expectation, often where concealed discover their Masters and their Propty at Petersburg sd. to be some thouds."
Although Cornwallis’s army “did not compel any” slaves to go with them, “wherever they had an opportunity the soldiers and inferior officers likewise, enticed and flattered the Negroes and prevailed on vast numbers to go along with them . . .”\(^{47}\) Urged by Virginia authorities to release captured slaves, Cornwallis readily conceded that “great numbers have come to us from different parts of the country.” How many cannot be precisely ascertained, but Clinton observed that on the day he took command in Virginia, Cornwallis had “above 7,000 men,” and “I have always understood thousands of poor blacks.” When he surrendered at Yorktown, Cornwallis had, according to Clinton, some 5,000 sailors and blacks, in addition to 4,000 regular troops. Since only about 800 of the 5,000 were “man of war sailors,” the rest were apparently runaways.\(^{48}\)

In the absence of full statistics on slave losses, isolated figures such as those presented here are highly suggestive if not definitive. The conclusion is inescapable that the volume of runaways was large—so large as to threaten the stability of slave society and create a severe shortage of slave laborers. By 1780 inflation and British raids had driven the price of “common planting Negroes” to over £4,000 and of “boys and girls” to £3,000 in terms of current money.\(^{49}\) It is very possible that the demand for slave labor, which continued into the post-war years, inhibited rather than inspired the movement for emancipation.

Virginia authorities, faced with the loss of the work force and haunted by the consuming fear of an organized slave rising, imposed a rigorous system of controls to minimize the possibilities for mass escapes and reduce the opportunities even for individual defections. Citizen patrols were increased to maintain constant surveillance of blacks. Since Virginia slaves traditionally escaped through the web of waterways that interlaced the Tidewater region,\(^ {50}\) whenever British barges were known to be in an area the militia was sent out to remove all small craft moored at landings in coves on the numerous creeks and rivers.\(^ {51}\) Laws that were both co-optive and repressive were quickly enacted by the Virginia Convention. To discourage defections, the convention offered pardons to all fugitives who voluntarily

\(^{47}\) Honeyman Diary, May 27, 1781.


\(^{49}\) Honeyman Diary; the entry carries no specific date but is with the material for the beginning of 1780.

\(^{50}\) See Gerald W. Mullin, Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia (New York, 1972), for a thorough discussion of the problem through the entire century.

returned within ten days and approved the death penalty for those captured from the British. Another law decreed that slaves taken in arms would be transported and sold in the West Indies.

Because it was thought to have an immediate and enduring impact, swift exemplary punishment was sometimes employed. One slave, the property of William Smith, was shot and killed after refusing to surrender to Virginia troops. Two runaways, mistaking an American armed vessel in the James River for a British tender, declared their desire to serve Lord Dunmore and were promptly arrested, tried, and sentenced to death "as an example to others." Shortly after Dunmore’s Proclamation nine blacks, two of them women, were taken in an open boat trying to reach Norfolk. Two were wounded; the rest, the Virginia Gazette ominously predicted, “will soon be made examples of.”

Since, however, the state was responsible for compensating the owners of executed slaves and because runaways were often the most skilled and therefore the most valuable slaves Virginians frequently resorted to more practical forms of punishment in order to protect costly investments in human chattel. In a typical case, four Northampton County slaves were captured while attempting to reach Dunmore: two of them were sentenced to be hanged, the other two each to have one ear cut off, to be given thirty-nine lashes on the bare back, and then to be placed in the pillory. But the owners of the four slaves, Thomas Parramore and John Bowdoin, Jr., both prominent Northampton County planters, pleaded that “these deluded Wretches” were persuaded by an unidentified white man of the "extraordinary good treatment" of blacks by Dunmore and so endeavored to escape to him. The Virginia Committee of Safety ordered a letter written to Northampton County officials recommending them to delay the execution of the slaves until the convention could rule on the matter. The Virginia Convention ultimately granted a reprieve

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52 The Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates . . . on the 20th of March, 1775 (Richmond, 1816), 66.
54 The Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates on Monday . . . the 6th of May, 1776 (Richmond, 1816), 10.
55 Virginia Gazette (Dixon and Hunter), April 13, 1776.
56 Ibid., December 2, 1775.
57 A 1705 statute empowered justices to value condemned slaves; public funds were used to compensate the owner once the assembly was satisfied of the claim. Tate, Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg, 178–79.
58 Scribner and Tarter, eds., Revolutionary Virginia, VI, 305, 485.
59 Ibid., 449–50. Two of the four slaves in question were valued at £76 5s which perhaps influenced their owners. Ibid., 485.
and ordered the prisoners sent to work in the lead mines in Fincastle County instead.\textsuperscript{60}

Hard labor in remote Fincastle or Montgomery county mines had the clear advantage over execution of removing potential troublemakers without substantial cost to the state. At the same time it provided a work force to produce lead for cartridges, of which the state was “in extreme want.”\textsuperscript{61} Throughout the Revolution numbers of slaves, some of them “merely suspected of a design to . . . escape” to the British, were escorted under heavy guard to the mountainous western region of the state to labor in the lead mines. Others were put to work making saltpeter, so they could perform useful service without causing further trouble.\textsuperscript{62}

Transportation and incarceration, though they contributed nothing to the expansion of the state’s industrial base, also militated against a servile rising. At the urging of some inhabitants of Norfolk and Princess Anne counties\textsuperscript{63} the Virginia Convention invoked the law allowing transportation and sale to rid the state of troublesome blacks. In January 1776, for example, the convention ordered thirty-two blacks taken prisoner at Great Bridge to be “properly valued” and then to be transported for sale in the West Indies or the Bay of Honduras, the profits after expenses to be paid to their respective owners. Nine others apprehended as runaways but, not being suspected of bearing arms against the state, were ordered restored to their owners if claimed; if unclaimed they were to be sold at public auction.\textsuperscript{64} The black crews of several vessels “supposed to be British property” were also ordered sold at public auction by the convention, with the proceeds paid to the state.\textsuperscript{65}

Yet another means of handling captured fugitives was to incarcerate them in the public gaol at Williamsburg. Although some of the prisoners were put to labor on public-works projects, many of them languished and died while awaiting trial. After several slaves died in the Williamsburg jail\textsuperscript{66} their owners petitioned the convention to investigate conditions there. Since the state was liable for their deaths the convention appointed a committee to the task. The com-

\textsuperscript{60} Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates . . . on Monday, the 6th of May, 1776, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{61} To Samuel Huntington, March 21, 1781, Boyd et al., eds., Papers of Thomas Jefferson, V, 199.
\textsuperscript{62} Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates . . . on Monday, the 6th of May, 1776, pp. 17, 29, 36, 37.
\textsuperscript{63} The Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates . . . on Friday, the 1st of December, 1775 (Richmond, 1816), 94–95.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 99–100.
\textsuperscript{65} Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates . . . on Monday the 6th of May, 1776, pp. 65–66.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 10, 25.
mittee reported that the “jail, being badly planned and situated for the purpose of admitting a free air . . .” was also greatly overcrowded. The rooms which contained the black prisoners “abound with filth . . . owing to the want of necessary hands to assist in providing for so large and unusual a number of prisoners . . . .” The committee recommended that windows be cut in the walls of the jail and that the rooms be cleaned with vinegar and fumigated with burning tar to eliminate the “offensive smell, which . . . would be injurious to the most robust health . . . .” Fearful of an epidemic of putrid fever, the convention approved the measures.67

The apparatus of suppression was designed to intercept those slaves bold enough to try to join the British. The psychology of fear was meant to intimidate those who dreamed of doing so. Mixing persuasion with threats, the Virginia Gazette printed grim warnings to its readers, including one addressed directly to their slaves. Professing a desire “to give them a just view of what they are to expect, should they be so weak and wicked as to comply with what lord Dunmore requires,” the subscriber predicted that the British, once their ends were served, would “either give up the offending negroes to the rigour of the laws they have broken, or sell them in the West Indies, where every year they sell many thousands of their miserable brethren to perish either by the inclemency of the weather, or the cruelty of barbarous masters.” After noting that Dunmore’s Proclamation did not extend to the aged, the infirm, or to women and children, he reminded those contemplating defection that their defenseless families would be left “at the mercy of an enraged and injured people.” If that cruel prospect did not deter them, he urged would-be runaways to consider the difficulties of escaping and “what they must expect to suffer if they fall into the hands of the Americans . . . . whether we suffer or not,” he concluded, “if you desert us you most certainly will.”68

Running away by slaves had been defined as a criminal act in Virginia since 1680.69 The chances of being caught by the county militia or by a local patrol and of being punished by death, transportation, or hard labor were good, particularly during the war years when white fears of a servile rising were abnormally high. Under these conditions running away was a desperate measure to escape bondage.

67 Ibid., 36-37.
69 Tate, Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg, 164–65.
Although in the anarchic conditions created by war many slaves eluded both belligerents, the majority fled to the British army, perceiving that it offered them the best prospects for freedom.

In keeping with the promise of freedom given first by Dunmore to Virginia slaves and then made general by Clinton in 1779 the British army received, if it did not always welcome, the runaways. Inhibited by inherited racial attitudes still intrinsic to British society, the army was never genuinely committed to a policy of liberation. Although his proclamation cast Dunmore in the role of liberator, it was by no means a general emancipation. At best, it was a selective offer of freedom, directed principally at “all indented Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) . . . that are able and willing to bear Arms . . . .” Despite his ambitious plans to organize a black army and to use it to discipline the rebellious Virginians, Dunmore was no champion of emancipation. A slaveowner himself, he persistently invited slave defections without, however, freeing his own slaves or unleashing the black violence feared by the horror-stricken proprietor class—a fact that escaped neither the Patriot press nor Virginia slaves. When, for example, two of Dunmore’s slaves passed through Fredericksburg en route to his Berkeley plantation the Virginia Gazette pointedly noted that “his lordship has not been so very generous to his own bondsmen as he wished to be to those who were the property of others . . . .” Some blacks were equally suspicious of Dunmore’s motives. On being asked his opinion of Dunmore’s offer of freedom, Caesar, “the famous barber of York,” replied “that he did not know any one foolish enough to believe him, for if he intended to do so, he ought first-to set his own free.” Although Clinton’s proclamation promised freedom to those blacks who voluntarily joined the British, it threatened seizure and sale of those taken in arms against the British, the proceeds to be used “for the benefit of their captors.”

Selective and limited, British army policy was designed first to meet Britain’s special manpower needs: to provide pioneers and military laborers in North America, and to satisfy the perennial shortage of recruits for service in the West Indies, where European troops

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71 Dunmore’s Proclamation, November 7, 1775, Scribner and Tarter, eds., Revolutionary Virginia, IV, 334.
72 Virginia Gazette (Purdie), December 9, 1775; January 12, 1776 (quotation).
73 Ibid. (Pinkney), December 9, 1775.
74 Proclamation, June 30, 1779, British Headquarters Papers (Microfilm, Howard Tilton Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.); cited hereinafter as British Headquarters Papers.
were regularly and rapidly destroyed by the climate. The narrow limits of the policy were, moreover, purposely and unashamedly designed to accommodate the army's time-honored practice of taking spoils of war. Military expediency joined to the practice of despoiling the enemy produced a policy of ambivalence that both contradicted and invalidated even their limited and selective offer of freedom. Thus, even while the army acted as the essential catalyst to black resistance to slavery, army priorities, which conflicted with those surrounding emancipation, effectively discouraged slave rebellions of the type found in the West Indies and doomed black resistance in America to the largely individual form of defection to the British.

The army's employment of the former bondsmen lays bare its motives in inviting their defection and reflects the deeply entrenched racial attitudes that imbued it. Although the British stood to gain significant military advantage from their black allies, they made only limited use of blacks in combat. The garrison posted by Dunmore at Great Bridge in Norfolk County was defended by twenty-five privates of the 14th Regiment, some volunteers, and "a good many Negroes." 75 In the encounters preceding the major action at Great Bridge and in the battle of Great Bridge itself Dunmore's black soldiers were in the middle of the action. American forces, in a skirmish on December 4, reported killing sixteen blacks and five whites. 76 The following day an American party that fell in with a guard of about thirty mostly black troops, killed two and took two prisoners. 77 In the action at Great Bridge on December 9 Dunmore's black troops, led by Captain Samuel Leslie, brought up the rear ranks while the elite grenadiers led the advance upon the bridge. 78 Although the action lasted only twenty-five minutes, Americans counted 65 dead and wounded and estimated British losses at 102. 79

Dunmore's use of armed troops on land was, however, exceptional. Generally, the British preferred to restrict the use of armed blacks to actions at sea. British barges manned by black and white crews plied Virginia's rivers throughout the war. In the summer of 1781, for example, a "felonious corps of negroes and mulattoes," serving on the Surprise commanded by a Captain Ross, plundered homes on the

76 Virginia Gazette (Pinkney), December 9, 1775.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid. (Purdie), December 15, 1775.
79 Ibid. (Pinkney), December 13, 1775.
Rappahannock and the Piankatank rivers, “deluded” some slaves to join them, and seized by force those who would not. A Captain Robinson with four barges manned by a hundred mostly black crewmen conducted marauding expeditions through the summer and fall of 1781, leading a harassed resident of the Accomack shore to complain to the commissioner of war that “We have had most alarming times this Summer, all along shore, from a sett of Barges manned mostly by our own negroes who have run off.” Eventually, Robinson himself was captured.

The military’s reluctance to arm slaves reveals the dilemma inherent in its self-interested policy of emancipation: how to woo slaves belonging to rebels without attracting those belonging to Loyalists; how to induce fear in defiant white southerners without incurring their permanent hostility; how to inspire enough black resistance to satisfy British military needs without inciting rebellion. It was on the rock of this dilemma that British slave policy foundered. Instead of calling slaves to arms, the British army summoned them to serve. Although nominally free once they entered British lines, the majority of blacks continued to be employed in a servile capacity. Several hundred served Cornwallis’s army as batmen or body servants, performing duties consistent with servile status in a slave society. Regulations issued by Cornwallis at Petersburg allowed each infantry field officer to keep two blacks; captains, subalterns, staff and quartermaster sergeants, and sergeant majors were each permitted to have one black servant. Frequent reminders in the general orders, however, indicate that the regulations were routinely ignored by officers and that even common soldiers “harboured” black servants.

The great majority of black fugitives worked as military laborers, performing the menial and often the most rigorous and hazardous jobs. Dunmore’s black soldiers apparently did all of the drudgery, “acting as scullions, &c. on board the fleet”; during emergencies they were “kept constantly employed in digging entrenchments in wet ground, till at length the severity of their labour forced many of them to fly.” To spare his white soldiers from an unwholesome climate and

81 Colonel George Corbin to Colonel William Davies, August 18, 1781; Levin Joynes to Colonel Davies, September 10, 1781, ibid., 340, 411 (quotation).
82 Regulations Regarding the Number of Negroes and Horses, May 21, 1781, June 18, 1781, Orderly Books, British General and Brigade Orders, Lord Cornwallis, Virginia and Yorktown, May 23–October 22, 1781 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); cited hereinafter as General and Brigade Orders.
83 Virginia Gazette (Purdie), March 22, 1776.
84 Ibid. (Pinkney), November 30, 1775.
a severe work schedule General Phillips organized 250 black defectors into a company of pioneers and put them to work erecting fortifications in the sandy soil at Portsmouth. Led by a white officer, the black pioneers were, Phillips reported to Clinton, "of the greatest use" in the various departments of the army and in the construction of works and dams to raise the waters of the creeks.85 While he remained at Portsmouth, Cornwallis employed over a thousand blacks "to cut wood [and to] work on the trenches . . . ."86 Later upon his arrival there in August Cornwallis began fortifying Yorktown and Gloucester on the opposite shore. But the construction of earthworks, "carried forward day and night . . . ," took a heavy toll of British troops.87 Reflecting the common assumption that because of their dark skins and equatorial origins blacks were better able to withstand heat, Cornwallis ordered army blacks to do the heavy labor, observing that "the heat is too great to admit of the soldiers doing it."88 All of "the other drudgeries," such as burying offal at the cattle pens or clearing the streets of filth and rubbish or digging new and filling in old latrines, were assigned to the black troops to conserve the European troops.89

Whereas southern slaveowners often recognized the potential hazards of overexertion and exposure and eased their slaves' tasks at certain times of the year, the British army, driven by the dangers and necessities of war, made excessive demands on its military laborers. At the same time, it failed to provide either adequate food and clothing or effective protective and curative therapy for them. Although all eighteenth-century armies suffered high disease rates, the incidence of disease among army blacks was conspicuously higher than it was among white troops. Hundreds of Dunmore's blacks died of disease, which army doctors attributed to overcrowding and lack of clothing.90 Deserters from his service complained of "Hungry bellies, naked backs, and no fuel; besides, in other respects, the most cruel and inhuman treatment."91

What they probably referred to were the shortages of food and clothing and the overcrowding aboard the tenders, which led to an outbreak of jail fever, forcing Dunmore to land at Tucker's Mills on

85 Phillips to Clinton, April 3, 1781, PRO 30/11/5, ff. 155–62.
87 "The Doehla Journal," translated by Robert J. Tilden, William and Mary Quarterly, 2d Ser., XXII (July 1942), 241, 243 (quotation), 244.
88 Cornwallis to O'Hara, August 4, 1781, PRO 30/11/89, ff. 1–2.
89 Clinton to Cornwallis, August 30, 1781, Sir Henry Clinton Papers, 1750–1812 (William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Mich.).
91 Virginia Gazette (Pinkney), December 13, 1775.
the west side of the Elizabeth River. But, prevented by American forces under Lieutenant Colonel Frank Eppes from making incursions into the countryside for food, Dunmore departed the Elizabeth River, leaving behind 150 dead blacks. Late in June he landed some eight hundred, mostly black, troops on Gwynne’s Island at the mouth of the Piankatank River. In an effort to contain the spread of smallpox then ravaging his force he inoculated the healthy and sent the infected to hospitals built on the opposite side of the island. Still the disease spread, killing, Dunmore reported to his superiors, “an incredible number of our people, especially the blacks.” Daily nearby Virginia troops witnessed the horrible evidence of that mortality: bodies, decimated by disease, floated down the river into which they had been thrown in haste in lieu of burial.

When finally routed by American forces the British vessels slipped their cables and fled Gwynne’s Island, abandoning cannon, cattle, horses, furniture, tents for seven to eight hundred men, and several hundred sick, dying, and dead blacks. An American officer, part of the two-hundred-man landing force, recoiled at the “scene of misery, distress, and cruelty, [such as] my eyes never beheld . . .”: a child sucking at the breast of its dead mother; adults, still gasping for life, stretched out near the river’s edge, where they had crawled to find water and to escape the intolerable stench of the dead bodies that lay uncovered in open fields or sprawled together in shallow, mass graves. Although the total number of the dead cannot be ascertained, one American officer counted 130 graves, “or rather holes,” as he put it. In the seven-week occupation of Gwynne’s Island, American sources estimated that five hundred of Dunmore’s people died, most of them blacks. Twenty years later, “the shocking remembrance of thousands of miserable negroes who had perished there with hunger and disease” still remained. As he traveled along the Elizabeth River, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, architect and engineer, recorded in his journal that “Many Waggon loads of bones of Men women and children . . . covered the sand for a most considerable length . . . . The remnants of decaying rags still point to the skeletons

94 Honeyman Diary, March 17, 1776.
95 Dunmore to Germain, June 26, 1776, C.O. 5/1353, f. 386.
97 The source of the first quotation is Virginia Gazette (Purdie), July 19, 1776; the description of the child sucking at its mother’s breast and the following details are from ibid. (Dixon and Hunter), July 20, 1776.
98 For reports of the scene at Gwynne’s Island see From John Page, July 12, 1776, “Lee Papers,” V, 134; Virginia Gazette (Purdie), July 19, 1776 (quotation).
of many of these miserable victims . . . ."\textsuperscript{99}

In February a "contagious Distemper" struck the blacks who had joined Arnold in 1779. Aggravated by severe shortages of provisions that left even the "horses starving for want of Forage,"\textsuperscript{100} the disease "raged among the Negroes . . . [and] swept off great numbers of them,"\textsuperscript{101} including thirteen to fourteen of Jefferson's runaways.\textsuperscript{102} Although blacks are no more or less immune to smallpox than are whites, all other factors being equal,\textsuperscript{103} a disproportionately high percentage of black followers of the British army were ravaged by that disease. Inoculation had been the accepted prophylaxis against smallpox since early in the century. Perhaps because the operation was expensive,\textsuperscript{104} its use was generally confined to white troops during the Revolution. In June the disease infected the blacks with Cornwallis in Richmond. To impede the contagion inoculation was recommended. It was apparently not universally practiced, however, since a later order urged "such men as never had such disorder to avoid communicating with the nigros, untill a proper oppertunity shall be found to have them inoculated."\textsuperscript{105} Perhaps because the prophylactic procedure was confined to only a few, the disease spread rapidly. In July it broke out among the black refugees with Leslie at Portsmouth. Overwhelmed by its pervasiveness, Leslie ordered over seven hundred stricken blacks distributed "about the rebel planta-
tions."\textsuperscript{106} Leslie perhaps hoped that as valuable property they would be cared for by whites in the area, but Virginians viewed "their diabolical Practice . . . of sending out amongst us Persons infected with the Small Pox," as a callous attempt to spread one of the most vicious and fatal diseases of the day.\textsuperscript{107}

Through the rest of the British presence in Virginia, the virulence and pervasiveness of the disease went unchecked among black followers of the army. On August 5 General Charles O'Hara, who

\textsuperscript{100} Col. James Innes to Jefferson, March 6, 1781, Palmer \textit{et al.}, eds., \textit{Calendar of Virginia State Papers}, I, 557.
\textsuperscript{101} From David Jameson, March 10, 1781, Hutchinson, Rachal, \textit{et al.}, eds., \textit{Papers of James Madison}, III, 16.
\textsuperscript{102} Jefferson's Statement of Losses to the British at His Cumberland Plantations in 1781, January 27, 1783, Boyd \textit{et al.}, eds., \textit{Papers of Thomas Jefferson}, VI, 224–25.
\textsuperscript{105} June 18, 1781, General and Brigade Orders.
\textsuperscript{106} Leslie to Cornwallis, July 13, 1781, PRO 30/11/6, ff. 280–81.
replaced Leslie when the latter was ordered to Charleston, wrote to ask Cornwallis's advice about the rapidly worsening situation: "What will you have done with the hundreds of infected Negroes, that are dying by scores every day?" Although humanitarian concern was present in Cornwallis's reply, it was the threat of impending outbreaks of pestilence in the ranks that clearly occupied his attention: "It is shocking to think of the state of the Negroes, but we cannot bring a number of Sick and useless ones to this place; some place must be left for them and some person of the Country appointed to take charge of them to prevent their perishing."

For the time being at least O'Hara ignored Cornwallis's instructions: "Unless I receive orders to the contrary from you," he wrote in reply, "I will continue to victual the sick Negroes, above 1,000 in number. They would inevitably perish," he warned, "if our support was withdrawn. The people of this country are more inclined to fire upon than receive and protect a Negro whose complaint is the smallpox—the abandoning of these unfortunate beings to disease and famine, and what is worse than either, the resentment of their enraged master, I should conceive ought not to be done." Cornwallis's final word on the subject made it clear that the preservation of the more valuable lives of white soldiers was the first priority of his command: "I leave it to your humanity to do the best you can for the poor Negroes, but on your arrival here we must adopt some plan to prevent an Evil which not only destroys a great quantity of Provisions, but will certainly produce some fatal distemper in the Army."

A week later, when the evacuation of Portsmouth began, O'Hara, on Cornwallis's advice, gave military success the highest priority. After promising his superior officer "not [to] leave behind me any thing I conceive to be of smallest service, . . ." O'Hara sent to Cornwallis at Yorktown four hundred fit blacks to meet his pressing need for laborers. As for the sick blacks, "We shall be obliged to leave near 400 wretched Negroes; I have passed them all over to the Norfolk side, which is the most friendly quarter in our neighborhood and have begged of the people of Princess Ann and Norfolk counties to take them." Noting that he had left the sick blacks provisions for forty-five days, O'Hara concluded that such time "will either kill or cure the greatest number of them . . .".

108 O'Hara to Cornwallis, August 5, 1781, PRO 30/11/70, ff. 12–13.
109 Cornwallis to O'Hara, August 7, 1781, Charles Cornwallis Papers (microfilm in Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.); the originals are in the Public Record Office, PRO 30/8.
110 O'Hara to Cornwallis, August 9, 1781, PRO 30/11/71, ff. 16–17.
111 Cornwallis to O'Hara, August 10, 1781, Cornwallis Papers.
112 O'Hara to Cornwallis, August 15, 17, 1781, PRO 30/11/70, ff. 20–21, 22–23.
113 Ibid., August 17, 1781, PRO 30/11/70, ff. 22–23.
Perhaps communicated by the blacks sent by O'Hara from Portsmouth, smallpox broke out among the black troops at Yorktown in August. To make matters worse, the "great number of refugees" from Norfolk, Suffolk, and Princess Anne counties who arrived with O'Hara on August 22 led to the rapid consumption of provisions. As supplies dwindled, rations for blacks were the first to be cut. On September 4 orders were given to issue peas instead of flour to the Negroes. Within a week all of the food was bad, and the garrison was forced to eat "putrid ships meat and wormy biscuits that have spoiled on the ships." But when even contaminated rations became scarce, portions allotted to the blacks were surreptitiously withheld. After noting that "Great abuses have been committed in victualling the Negroes," the general orders for September 15 instructed the deputy quartermaster general to collect returns of the blacks with the various departments and to appoint someone to supervise the issuance of their rations.

On October 1 the town of York was completely invested by Franco-American forces. By October 7 the British, forced to abandon several outworks, were confined to a narrow area within the town. Many of the garrison were sick with dysentery and bloody flux or smallpox. On that day an eyewitness reported that the British "have turned several hundred Negroes out of the town in a most deplorable condition, perishing with famine and disease." At the surrender an American account described the tragic conclusion of the black flight to freedom with Cornwallis: "An immense number of Negroes have died, in the most miserable Manner in York."

The maintenance of racial distinctions such as these clearly point up the ambiguities that suffused British policy toward American slaves. So too did the British tendency to view blacks as marketable commodities. White Virginians frequently complained of the British practice of selling captured slaves in the West Indies. Rumors of the transportation and sale of black defectors began soon after Dunmore issued his proclamation and persisted until he abandoned the state. On his departure, for example, it was speculated that the destination of the thirty-five southbound vessels was the sugar islands, where the

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114 Cornwallis to Clinton, August 22, 1781, Charles C. Cornwallis, An Answer to that Part of the Narrative of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton, K. B., Which Relates to the Conduct of Lieutenant General Earl Cornwallis, During the Campaign in North-America in the Year 1781 (London, 1783), 187.
115 Cornwallis to Clinton, August 22, 1781, PRO 30/11/74, ff. 74–75.
116 September 15, 1781, General and Brigade Orders.
118 Honeyman Diary, October 7, 1781.
black troops would be offered for sale. During the Phillips-Arnold raids, it was reported that in one shipment from Yorktown 360 captured blacks were removed for sale.

Whether these charges are true cannot at this point be established. Undoubtedly, many Virginia slaves ended up in military service in the West Indies. A declining white population and an unsuitable climate for Europeans that produced an appallingly high death rate among troops stationed there and created a chronic need for manpower led colonial nations to adopt the practice of recruiting slaves for military service in the Caribbean. During the American Revolution, when the British need for troops there became desperate, the employment of black laborers to conserve the strength of British regulars was accelerated. Several shiploads of "English Negroes," apparently the unclaimed property of Loyalists, were ordered by General Sir John Vaughan to the public service in St. Lucia in 1780. "In 1779 . . . the Black Carolina Corps was raised from among loyalists and free Negroes. After the British surrender at Yorktown this corps was distributed among several British islands . . . ." Upon the evacuation of South Carolina in 1782 General Leslie organized a black corps from among the protected blacks with the army and designated them for service in the West Indies. On Cornwallis's orders Leslie sent two hundred Carolina blacks to St. Lucia to work as military laborers in order to conserve the strength of white troops. In anticipation of an attack by French and Spanish forces the crown late in 1782 authorized the raising of three corps—one of them in America—for the defense of Jamaica.

There is no conclusive evidence, however, that the army engaged in slave traffic. The British record is certainly not above suspicion. The army freed no slaves when such action would seriously hamper the

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120 Peter Minor to Garrett Minor, August 9, 1776, Garrett Minor and David Watson Correspondence (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). Peter Minor was with the 5th Regiment, which was ordered to defend against a Dunmore landing. Like many other Patriots he reported that half of Dunmore's vessels were departing for the West Indies to sell blacks there. Actually, the thirty-five ships sailed for St. Augustine in East Florida. The blacks aboard were, Governor Patrick Tony to the Secretary of State, "sent here to be kept in custody," Tony to Germain, October 10, 1776, C.O. 5/557, ff.3, 193.

121 From Edmund Pendleton, May 7, 1781, Hutchinson, Rachal, et al., eds., Papers of James Madison, III, 111.

122 Roger N. Buckley, Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815 (New Haven and London, 1979), 1-4.

123 A. St. Leger to Sir John Vaughan, December 17, 18, 1780, Sir John Vaughan Papers, 1779-1781 (William L. Clements Library).

124 Buckley, Slaves in Red Coats, 4.


126 Carleton to Leslie, September 10, 1782, British Headquarters Papers.

127 Archibald Campbell to Carleton, December 6, 1782, PRO 30/55, f. 56.
successful prosecution of the war. On more than one occasion military commanders sacrificed morality to expediency by restoring runaways to their owners. Unable to accommodate all those who claimed his protection, Dunmore disarmed the black soldiers least fit for service and abandoned them to the mercy of their former owners. 128 Despite his obligation to them, Dunmore forced many black defectors to return to their owners who had taken the oath of allegiance to Britain. 129 At Governor Thomas Nelson's request Cornwallis agreed to allow white owners to search for their slaves in British encampments and to take those who were willing to return, provided the former master was neither in the military nor a public official and provided he gave his parole not to act contrary to British interests in the future. 130 Slaves seized from farms on the Rappahannock and the Piankatank rivers by the British privateer Surprise were promptly returned from New York and restored to their owners when it was discovered that they were the property of Virginia Loyalists. 131 When, desperate for supplies, the army requested and obtained leave from Virginia authorities to restore kidnapped slaves and other plunder in exchange for provisions, they quickly perverted the flag-of-truce vessels for partisan purposes. Only the slaves belonging to Loyalists or to passive citizens were restored; those belonging to active Patriots were retained. 132

By these and by related actions the British army demonstrated clearly that what was singularly important to it was military success. Almost equally high among military priorities was the collection and sale of spoils of war. It was the view of the army that captured enemy property could be disposed of in any way the captor deemed proper, and slaves were property. 133 Counterpoised to Clinton's offer of freedom to those blacks who voluntarily joined the British was the threat that all those taken in arms would be "purchased for the public service and sold for the benefit of their captors." 134 A quiet agreement between military and civil officials allowed the sale of spoils to

129 Virginia Gazette (Pinkney), November 30, 1775.
130 Cornwallis to Nelson, August 6, 1781, PRO 30/11/90, ff. 19-20.
131 Account of the Capture of a Schooner Called the "Hero's Revenge" . . ., Palmer et al., eds., Calendar of Virginia State Papers, II, 170; General James Robertson to Cornwallis, August 22, 1781, PRO 30/11/6, ff. 367-68.
133 Negroes, September, 1819, PRO 30/8/344, ff. 109-11.
134 Proclamation, June 30, 1779, British Headquarters Papers.
enrich the officers who led the expeditions and to reward the impoverished soldiers who served in them. After the military operations that devastated the Chesapeake in 1779 General Edward Matthews and Sir George Collier, who led the naval forces, “divided one-eighth of the total prize money between themselves,” the rest between the army and navy. Similar arrangements were made between Arnold and Captain Thomas Symonds, commanding officer of the Charon, before the Virginia expedition. En route to Virginia the two officers agreed to an equal division of the spoils between the services. Soon, however, dissension wrecked the accord, and the case was remanded to the New York vice-admiralty court. The court awarded half the proceeds to the 280 sailors, but retained the other half pending the king’s pleasure. Finally, in March 1782, after Clinton personally interceded with the crown on behalf of the army, the king ruled that one-eighth of the amount remaining should be paid to Arnold, the rest to be divided among the officers and soldiers “as had been done on former occasions.”

Evidence of a market in slaves is not conclusive, but it is suggestive. When in June, a little more than a month after Cornwallis took command in Virginia, Arnold, with Cornwallis’s approval, left Virginia for New York, Cornwallis explained his departure as due to “his present indispositions.” But, perhaps to vindicate himself from any charges Arnold might make that he was receiving a disproportionately large share of the plunder, “especially the negro and tobacco traffic,” Cornwallis added a careful demurrer: “He will represent the horrid enormities which are committed by our privateers in Chesapeake-bay; and I must join my earnest wish, that some remedy may be applied to an evil which is so very prejudicial to his Majesty’s service.” The most revealing evidence linking the army to slave traffic is Leslie’s expression of concern that the smallpox epidemic at Portsmouth “will ruin our market, which was bad enough before.”

Although the system of surveillance set up by the Patriots reduced the physical opportunities for slaves to run away and made mass escapes difficult, in and of themselves surveillance and exemplary punishment were not enough to prevent rebellion, given the fierce desire for freedom exhibited by Virginia slaves. But the ambivalence

137 C.O. 5/106, f. 42.
139 Stevens, ed., *Campaign in Virginia*, I, 487.
140 Leslie to Cornwallis, July 13, 1781, PRO 30/11/6, ff. 280–81.
and contradictions inherent in British policy made it clear to blacks, if not to their frightened white owners, that the British call to arms against their masters was aimed at winning the war, not at promoting social change. Promised freedom, the great majority of blacks who offered themselves to the British as willing soldiers were assigned instead to servile status. Unarmed, overworked, underfed, discarded when rendered useless by disease, they found little hope or encouragement for rebellion with the army, which used them as a tool instead of as a weapon. Thus discouraged, most Virginia slaves sensibly chose the relative security of the farm or plantation over the uncertainties of army life. Thousands of others, however, risked the perils of running away and the terrible realities of army life because they perceived in that course the best prospects for freedom. The fact that so many made that hazardous choice is compelling evidence of the depth of black resistance to slavery in eighteenth-century Virginia and indeed throughout the Revolutionary War South.