

## 7

RADICALISM AT  
FLOODTIDE

1778-1781

THE YEAR 1778 FIGURED CRUCIALLY FOR THE AMERICAN PATRIOTS. The British occupation of Philadelphia through the first half of the year, the collapse of morale in Washington's army, the waning of patriotism on the home front, and the repeated failure of most states to fulfill the request of the Continental Congress for soldiers and supplies presented bleak prospects for winning the war. But Benjamin Franklin's charm and genius in Paris plucked the American cause from near disaster. By engineering a treaty of commerce and amity with the French, announced in March 1778, the Americans soon celebrated the French declaration of war on Great Britain and the arrival of French troops, a formidable French fleet, and great quantities of war matériel. American prospects brightened, at least momentarily.

Yet French intervention did not yet tip the balance. Though the British withdrew from Philadelphia in June 1778, pulling back thousands of troops and naval forces to New York City, the war in the North produced only a stalemate. By the end of 1778, British strategists decided to move the war south in an attempt to cut the southern states off from the northern states. For two more years, the war wore on, sapping American resources, producing abrasive conflicts within the Continental Congress, and convincing a divided Congress to print prodigious amounts of paper money to support the war.

The French alliance kept the American nation in the war but could not enable them to win it. Emblematic of the struggle to create a unified young nation, ratification of the Articles of Confederation under which the Congress acted could not be secured from all the states until March 1, 1781.

During the years from 1778 to 1781, when the fortunes of the quest for independence hung in the balance, revolutionary radicalism reached its apogee. Up and down the seaboard and from tidewater to up-country regions, those bent on transforming their society or changing the prosecution of the war greatly complicated the thrust for independence. In these years, the American Revolution had to be carried forward on multiple fronts. The front familiar in our history books is the one on the battlefield, which mostly moved south by December 1778. Unfamiliar to most of today's public is the chapter of the war involving African Americans, who from 1778 to 1781 rebelled in large numbers. A second largely unremembered front involved Native Americans, who in these same years struggled to stave off an imperialist nation in the making. In addition, a third conflict developed in which fellow patriots fought wrenching battles with one another. Building on earlier hopes for a rejuvenated and reconstructed American society, elements of the independence-minded American people reacted militantly to economic injustice in urban areas, even to the point of outright class warfare under the eyes of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. In Virginia, class tension ripped apart efforts for the state to defend itself. And in Washington's Continental army, men by the thousands who had pledged their lives to the American cause rose up in mutiny. It is well enough to chronicle the battlefield action—some of which is interwoven with other matters below—but the hidden history of radical America is what this chapter seeks to recapture.

*Blood in the Streets*

The War of Independence entered a new military phase as the action moved south in late 1778, as we will see below. But at the same time it entered another phase: A meltdown of the fiscal structure undergirding the war effort now brought demands for radical intervention in the imploding economy.

Dislocations of the economy have been endemic to most wartime societies, usually characterized by shortages of essential commodities, inflation, and profiteering. The American Revolution was no different. In the history books, the Continental Congress gets most of the blame, especially for issuing



SCALES of DEPRECIATION of Continental Money.				
	Of Congress.	Of Pennsylvania, by act of Assembly,	From the merchants' books: For Philadelphia.	For Virginia.
1777.				
January		1 1-2	1 1-4	1 1-4
February	Value of 100	1 1-2	1 1-2	1 1-4
March	Continental dollars in specie.	2	2	2
April		2 1-2	2	2
May		2 1-2	2 1-2	2
June		2 1-2	2 1-2	2
July	Dollars.	3	3	3
August	gold.	3	3	3
September	100 00 0	3	3	3
October	90 77 3	3	3	3
November	82 73 0	3	3	3
December	74 70 0	4	4	4
1778.				
January	67 85 0	4	4	4
February	61 83 2	5	5	5
March	56 79 6	5	5	5
April	48 74 4	6	6	5
May	42 77 5	5	5	5
June	36 86 1	4	4	5
July	32 79 3	4	4	5
August	27 87 3	5	5	5
September	24 78 5	5	5	5
October	20 84 5	5	5	5
November	17 88 0	6	6	6
December	14 89 2	6	6	6
1779.				
January	12 85 1	8	7 8 9	8
February	10 85 6	10	10	10
March	9 87 1	10 1-2	10 11	10
April	8 89 7	17	12 14 16 22	16
May	7 89 5	24	22 24	20
June	6 89 2	20	22 20 18	20
July	6 40 0	19	18 19 20	21
August	5 89 6	20	20	22
September	4 88 5	24	20 28	24
October		30	30	28
November	3 89 6	38 1-2	32 45	36
December	3 30 0	41 1-2	45 38	40

Chart of the Depreciation of Continental Money; from Pelatiah Webster, Political Essays on the Nature and Operation of Money, Public Finances, and Other Subjects (1791).

SCALES of DEPRECIATION of Continental Money.				
	Of Congress.	Of Pennsylvania, by act of Assembly,	From the merchants' books: For Philadelphia.	For Virginia.
1780.				
January	3 40 0	40 1-2	40 45	42
February	2 89 1	47 1-2	45 55	45
March	2 45 0	61 1-2	60 65	50
April	2 45 0	61 1-2	60	60
May	2 45 0	59	60	60
June	2 45 0	61 1-2	60	65
July	2 45 0	64 1-2	60 65	65
August	2 45 0	70	65 75	70
September	2 45 0	72	75	72
October	2 45 0	73	75 80	73
November	2 45 0	74	80 100	74
December	2 45 0	75	100	75
1781.				
January	2 45 0	75	100	75
February	2 45 0	75	100 120	80
March	2 45 0	75	120 135	90
April	2 45 0	75	135 200	100
May.	2 45 0	75	200 500	150

May 31, 1781, Continental money ceased to pass as currency, but was afterwards bought and sold as an article of speculation, at very uncertain and defultory prices, from 500 to 1000 to 1.

The exchange of State-money of Pennsylvania, in May 1781, was 2½, 6, 7, 5, and 4, to 1 hard Money.

huge quantities of paper money—Continental dollars—to finance the Revolution. But Congress had few alternatives. It had no authority to levy taxes to pay for the war, and the states taxed far too little to underwrite a long and expensive conflict. While hoping for massive loans from France and Holland, Congress issued what amounted to IOUs—promises to pay in the future what it could not pay at the time. With the economy collapsing—torn by a sharp decline in agricultural and artisanal production—the flood of paper money backed only by hopes for a robust future economy produced galloping inflation. The worth of a Continental dollar in specie (gold or silver) fell from one hundred cents in September 1777 to fifty-six cents in March 1778 and to twenty-five cents in September of that year. Within another six months, by which time the dollar was worth ten cents, the expression of the day became “not worth a continental”; Mercy Otis Warren called the dollars “immense heaps of paper trash.” For an ordinary family this translated into devastating



price hikes: A gallon of molasses costing 2 shillings in early 1776 cost 20 shillings in early 1778 and 200 hundred shillings at the end of 1779; the price of a bushel of corn rose from 3 shillings in mid-1776 to 100 shillings in April 1779 to 180 shillings in February 1780.<sup>1</sup>

Every state government wrestled with this difficult situation and none harder than Pennsylvania's. We focus on the problem as it developed in Philadelphia, the nation's largest city, because the economic crisis struck with unusual force there, and because it was there that it led to the spilling of blood among patriots just a few blocks from Pennsylvania Statehouse, where an alarmed Continental Congress sat.

Although Congress halted its program of issuing paper money to feed the war machine in the fall of 1779 (by which time the dollar was worth four cents in specie), this came much too late to avert a disastrous confrontation. For Pennsylvania's wartime government the key issue was how far the powers of government should reach in regulating the economy for the public good. Aside from indicting economic criminals who violated laws prohibiting forestalling—the purchasing of flour and withholding it from the market in anticipation of highly advantageous price increases—and monopolizing, regulation boiled down to one thing: price controls. Could Pennsylvania's legislature balance the claims of farmers and merchants who wanted the best price for commodities against the claims of urban consumers, especially those living close to the poverty line, who demanded the necessities of life at an affordable or “just” price?

Though Pennsylvanians had elected the most radical body of lawmakers ever known in the state, the legislature could not agree on instituting price controls, primarily because most of the legislators represented the farmers, who opposed controls limiting the price they could charge for their produce. This left urban people, the main sufferers of an economy careening out of control, bereft of legislative remedies. This vexing issue was not a collision of ideology from above and ideology from below. The Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, as early as January 1779, recognized the genuine privation of “the industrious poor” and attributed their distress to the “heinously criminal” forestalling and monopolizing practices of merchants. Three months later, the legislature tried to stop “the forestalling and regrating of provisions.” But neither political body was able to clamp a lid on the rising prices of “bread and other necessities of life,” because they could think of no device for enforcing a price control law.<sup>2</sup>

Even in urban centers the artisan population was divided on governmental intervention in the economy. Lower artisans for the most part advocated strict regulation of prices as a way of reinstituting the “moral economy” at a time when inflation was pushing the cost of life's necessities beyond the reach of ordinary families, many of whom had sacrificed the male head of household to military duty. Many upper artisans, however, cleaved to the ideology of free trade and laissez-faire principles of political economy, which gave merchants and retailers freedom to charge whatever the market would bear. In maintaining this position, they demonstrated the resilience of the bourgeois values of those swept from office in the final days before independence and those bested in the struggle over the Pennsylvania constitution of 1776.

As early as mid-1777, rising prices created distress in the homes of ordinary people, who quickly found a cause of their misery in opportunistic merchant practices. “Every article of life or convenience was raised upon us, eight, ten, or twelve fold at least,” Philadelphia militiamen complained in June 1777. They were “at a loss to this day, what course or station of life to adopt to support ourselves and families.”<sup>3</sup> An anonymous writer in the *Pennsylvania Packet* raised the tocsin: “To all FORESTALLERS and RAISERS of the price of GOODS and PROVISIONS. Take notice that a storm is brewing again[st] you. Warning the first.” By September, as the British moved closer to capturing Philadelphia, militiamen began deserting in large numbers, unable to leave their jobs and families with a military salary that could not keep up with the cost of basic foodstuffs.

The situation worsened throughout 1778, with prices rising relentlessly and the Continental Congress frustrated at its lack of authority to implement a national plan to tax heavily enough to start retiring the mountain of paper money it had issued. “A Fair Dealer” argued that those who practiced “monopoly and extortion” were making “the poor almost clamorous.” Writing in a Philadelphia newspaper, “Mobility” used a little history to put profit-maximizing merchants and retailers on warning: “It has been found in Britain and France, that the people have always done themselves justice when the scarcity of bread has arisen from the avarice of forestallers.” Reminding Philadelphians that in Europe the distressed had “appropriated stores to their own use” and sometimes “hung up the culprits who have created their distress without judge or jury,” “Mobility” continued with a veiled threat: “Hear this and tremble, ye enemies to the freedom and happiness of your country. . . . We cannot live without bread—hunger will break through stone walls and



the resentment excited by it may end in your destruction." These were strong words, but they were only a little stronger than those of the commander in chief. Washington had already deplored the "want of virtue" among merchants and expressed his belief to Congress that "unless extortion, forestalling, and other practices, which have crept in and become exceedingly prevalent and injurious to the common cause, can meet with proper checks, we must inevitably sink under such a load of accumulated oppression."<sup>4</sup>

In January 1779 more storm signals arose. Angry seamen, seeking higher wages as the cost of basic foodstuffs headed skyward, removed the rigging from ships in order to prevent the departure of the merchants' vessels. On January 19, the state's executive council issued a proclamation "threatening the heaviest penalties of the law against those who, by engrossing quantities of flour, had enhanced the price of bread and other necessities of life."<sup>5</sup> The response of the engrossers was magisterial repudiation of those who criticized their behavior.

By May, the situation grew more critical for the poor while providing Philadelphia's leading grain and flour merchants new opportunities for profit. With prices still rising and wages lagging far behind, laboring people faced an outrageous affront to the community: Knowing that the French fleet was approaching with hard money—gold—to pay for foodstuffs, flour merchants refused to sell for paper currency, the only medium of exchange available to the city's ordinary families. Overnight, bread was not to be bought at any price.

With prices rising at the compound rate of 17 percent a month, tempers flared on the eve of a militia muster. Hurrying through the streets late at night, radical militia organizers tacked up a broadside on city lampposts and tavern doors that urged the restoration of prices prevailing five months before. At dawn, Philadelphians moving through the streets read words that fairly jumped off the broadside: "In the midst of money we are in poverty and exposed to want in a land of plenty. . . . Down with your prices, or down with yourselves. For by the living and eternal God, we will bring every article down to what it was last Christmas, or we will [put] down . . . those who opposed. We have turned out against the enemy and we will not be eaten up by monopolizers and forestallers." When some Philadelphians began tearing down the broadsides, militiamen collared them and roughed them up. They chased one merchant down the street, wrestled him to the ground, put him

on a horse, and paraded him bareheaded around the city. Men with clubs went from store to store to "oblige" shopkeepers to lower their prices.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the workday, a rowdy town meeting, gathered behind the statehouse, shouted approval of Pennsylvania militia general Daniel Roberdeau's passionate speech on behalf of the city's militiamen and poor. He attacked merchants for forming a combination to raise food prices and asserted the community's right to "set limits to evils" created by those "getting rich by sucking the blood" of ordinary people. From the meeting came an ad hoc Committee of Trade composed of middling traders, several ship captains and ship's carpenters, and members of a company of the radical City Artillery. Though they lacked legal authority, they had a long history of customary law behind them. Acting much as the citizens of Longmeadow, Massachusetts, as recounted in chapter 5, the committee set a plan to fix prices, cajole merchants and retailers to comply with them, and distribute bread and flour to the poor. Warning that the "want of flour has in all countries produced the most fatal resentments," the committee told the offending merchants that "discontents, far beyond our power to remedy," would erupt if forestalling continued. Speculators and monopolizers who avoided militia duty, they charged, could easily pay the stiff fines imposed on "non-associators" with the profits they were making. But "the middling and poor will still bear the burden, and either be totally ruined by heavy fines, or risque the starving of their families, whilst themselves are fighting the battles of those who are avariciously intent on amassing wealth by the destruction of the more virtuous part of the community." Congress chimed in, wagging its finger at offending merchants and farmers in a sharply worded report.<sup>7</sup>

But words could not correct the situation. Conservatives tarred the town meeting as a motley crew of "printer's devils, barber's boys, apprentice lads," and militiamen, as one later wrote, who were ignorant enough to think that the "old rags and lampblack" used to print Continental dollars could be converted "into gold."<sup>8</sup> But more ominous than slander was defiance. Reasoning that the Committee of Trade had no legal authority to compel reduction in prices of the commodities stored in their warehouses, merchants refused to sell their goods at controlled prices. This brought the city closer to the precipice.

Word of the Committee of Trade's plan of action brought plaudits from other parts of the country. Citizens of Albany acclaimed Philadelphians for opposing the free-trade merchants "who lately had the name of the greatest



extortioners on the continent," and announced that their town and its surrounding region had "followed [Philadelphia's] example." Word arrived from Boston that merchants themselves, warning that the crowd's fury would "burst on the heads of monopolizers, as it did on the odious stamp-masters" of the mid-1760s, agreed on their own schedule of price controls.<sup>9</sup>

Through the summer of 1779, advocates of an unrestricted market economy and supporters of a managed moral economy stared and shouted at each other over a widening chasm. The militiamen of the City Artillery, just finishing a tour of duty, marched to the statehouse and then to the College of Philadelphia on June 27 to support the price-fixing committee. A few days later they promised that "We have arms in our hands and know the use of them—and are ready and willing to support your honorable board [the price-fixing committee]—we will no longer be trampled upon." Merchants stonewalled their critics. Many of them had formed the Republican Society in March 1779 with the avowed purpose of overturning the 1776 state constitution; from this same group now came the argument that "freedom of trade, or unrestrained liberty of the subject to hold or dispose of his property as he pleases is absolutely necessary to the prosperity of every community."<sup>10</sup>

Contributing to the anger of Philadelphia's lower and middle orders was their belief that price control resisters were wealthy merchants and lawyers who hated the goals of revolutionary radicals, were plotting to overturn the radical constitution of 1776, and were Tories or Tory sympathizers who had welcomed the British occupation of the city from September 1777 to June 1778. Many of the upper-class Philadelphians had profited from the free-spending soldiers, in some cases married their daughters to British officers, and gaily joined in sumptuous British social events. Everyone knew how sympathy for the enemy surfaced at the Meschianza, the lavish fete staged by British officers to honor their commander, General William Howe, as he left Philadelphia in May 1778, just ahead of the British evacuation. The estate of wealthy Loyalist merchant Joseph Wharton on the southern border of the city provided the scene. British officers came to the Meschianza costumed as medieval knights, with Philadelphia ladies turned out as Turkish maidens. Life-size hand-painted dummy boards of British grenadiers decorated the regal Wharton gardens. A mock-medieval chivalric tournament amused the guests before dinner. Then twenty-four slaves in Turkish outfits served courses almost beyond count. Fireworks and dancing followed, keeping some of the celebrants away from their beds until six the next morning.<sup>11</sup>

The knightly splendor of the Meschianza, at which slaves were displayed conspicuously as symbols of subordination and aristocratic privilege, caused great resentment among ordinary Philadelphians and came to haunt Philadelphia's aristocracy after the British decamped. On July 4, barely two weeks after the British evacuation, a raucous crowd paraded a local prostitute through the streets overdressed in high-fashion headgear similar to that worn by Tory Philadelphia women during the British occupation. Hannah Griffiths, a young Quaker woman, scribbled in her notebook verses deploring the affair: "A shameful scene of dissipation; / The death of sense and reputation; / A deep degeneracy of nature; / A Frolick, for the lash of Satire."

In the context of rising prices and scarce household commodities, the memory of the Meschianza was all too vivid. One newspaper account reported that elderly Philadelphians could not remember "such a frequency of public entertainments and dissipation" while "fellow citizens [were] suffering every hardship . . . destitute of the necessities of life for . . . themselves and their little ones."<sup>12</sup> Aristocratic, purse-proud behavior, reeking of Toryism, did not really leave the city with the British army but remained behind to increase the misery of common Philadelphians.

In July 1779, at a town meeting convened to elect a new and larger price control committee, militiamen wielding clubs shouted down the wealthy merchant John Cadwalader as he rose to oppose price controls. Philadelphians then chose between two slates—one reflecting merchant interests, headed by flour merchant Robert Morris, the other drawn to reflect a cross-section of the community. The people's ticket prevailed by a vote of 2,115–281, showing clearly that the mass of Philadelphians wanted some kind of restriction on the market behavior of merchants. Yet even a few dozen determined merchants and several hundred supporters were able to hobble attempts at price control. By refusing to sell, or directing incoming shipments to land at other ports, Philadelphia's merchants crippled the effort.

Robert Morris, a wealthy merchant who was soon to be treasurer of the Continental Congress in charge of running the finances of the war, became a lightning rod for the surging debate. The argument pivoted on the extent of private property rights in a situation where the free exercise of property ran squarely athwart the public interest. Morris insisted that his freedom included the right to send his ships where and when he wanted, even laden with flour desperately needed in the city; or to withhold incoming cargoes until he decided that the moment was ripe to sell advantageously; or to sell



flour to whomever he chose at whatever price he could obtain. Did private property, then, while indisputably individual in most cases, have no social nature that put limits on its use?

Morris and his merchant supporters answered that question with an emphatic "No!" Using Philadelphia's conservative newspaper, they argued that every individual should be able to "taste and enjoy the sweets of that liberty of person and property, which was highly expected under an independent government." For them, that was the promise of the war for independence. "It is a sad omen to find among the first effects of independence," wrote Pelatiah Webster, the merchants' chief essayist, "greater restraints and abridgements of natural liberty, than ever we felt under the government we have lately renounced and shaken off."<sup>13</sup>

The counterargument of the city's price control committee was that there "are offenses against society which are not in all cases offenses against the law." The city's ship carpenters and other artisans took this argument a step further, using the building of Morris's ships as an example. "We hold that though by the acceptance of wages we have not and cannot have any claim in the property of the vessels we built for you," they argued, "we nevertheless have—and the people of the state in general have—a right in the *service* of the vessel because it constituted a considerable part of the advantage they hoped to derive from their labors." Morris and Webster stood their ground: "Take off every restraint and limitation from our commerce. Let trade be as free as air. Let every man make the most of his goods and in his own way; and then he will be satisfied." The shipbuilders fired back: "That the property of the vessel is the immediate right of the owner, and the service of it is the right of the community collectively with the owners, is . . . rationally deduced from the purpose for which all mercantile vessels are built."<sup>14</sup>

The argument over whether the good of the community took precedence over the profit margins of its individual members brought Philadelphians face-to-face with conflicting ideas of why they were fighting the Revolution. For the shipbuilders and many other artisans, private property was a social institution because every economic transaction had a social dimension. For the merchants, every man had a "natural liberty" to obtain prices dictated by whatever the market would bear, and this, even if it harmed the community in the short run, would benefit the people as a whole in the long run.

During the summer of 1779 the city's radical leaders faced an ideological crisis. Militiamen had looked to Thomas Young and James Cannon a few

years before, but Young had died of a "virulent fever" in 1777 while serving as a surgeon in a military hospital, and Cannon had moved to South Carolina. Now they turned to General Daniel Roberdeau, the popular Quaker doctor James Hutchinson, artist-soldier Charles Willson Peale, brewer Timothy Matlack, Thomas Paine, watchmaker Owen Biddle, and clock maker David Rittenhouse for inspiration and clout. Some of these men had helped construct the radical state constitution three years before and a few of them represented Philadelphia in the legislature elected in October 1778. But faced with merchant recalcitrance on scaling back prices of foodstuffs, the radical leaders' options boiled down to several equally repugnant choices: Either admit that price controls could not work without voluntary merchant compliance, or lead the militia into an extralegal enforcement strategy.

None of the principal radical leaders left clear accounts of the tortured decision making thrust upon them in the summer of 1779. But it is clear that with merchants unwilling to yield and the legislature declining to pass a price control law, the alliance between middle-class radical leaders and their lower-class militia constituency began to unravel. In June, the Committee of Trade hedged its bets by advising the people to "exercise your industry [in] discovering concealed hoards" of foodstuffs—an attempt to needle merchants into a compliance that they had already disavowed—but "to do [put up] with some men whose subtlety is equal to their delinquency and who while they commit the offense, will artfully evade the punishment properly due thereto."<sup>15</sup>

More worrisome to committee members was the vociferousness of the militiamen's rhetoric. A few weeks after Robert Morris defended his free-trade position, a broadside spread around the city in late August urged the price control committee elected earlier that month to press forward. The radicals' broadside of late May had been signed "Come on Cool[l]y." But this time the radicals' broadside was signed "Come on Warmly." We will probably never know the author's name, but we know he was anything but temperate. He called "upon you all, in the name of our bleeding country, to rouse up as a lion out of his den, and make those beasts of prey, to humble and prove by this day's conduct, that any person whatever, though puffed like a toad . . . shall dare to violate the least resolve of our committee, it were better for him, that a millstone was fastened to his neck, and he cast into the depth of the sea, or that he had never been born."<sup>16</sup>

With the gauntlet thrown down by those socially beneath them, the middle-class radical leaders retreated. The Committee of Trade dissolved



itself on September 24, 1779, in effect raising a white flag of truce to the merchants. Charles Willson Peale lay low and even Tom Paine retreated from the vanguard position he had occupied since writing *Common Sense*. If radicals such as Peale and Paine lost the fire in their bellies, the militiamen did not. Two days after the Committee of Trade disbanded in late September, militiamen met on the city's common and reconstituted the Committee of Privates. They tried to rebuild the cross-class alliance that had served them well in the past. But Peale, James Hutchinson, and two others they summoned to support them refused to attend. It was a sharp blow to the rank-and-file militiamen, though most of their elected junior officers stood with them. Thus constituted, they moved forward to accomplish in the streets what they could not achieve in the legislative hall.

On October 4, 1779, handbills appeared on Philadelphia's streets exhorting militiamen "to drive from the city all disaffected persons [Tories] and those who supported them." The handbill named offending monopolizing and engrossing merchants, including the prominent Quaker John Drinker, and urged that the chief offenders be "put on the prison ship to be sent to New York," which the British still controlled. Gathering at a tavern on the city's edge, the militiamen mustered and sallied forth to do battle with the principal British-leaning Philadelphians whose free-market behavior was pinching their lives intolerably. If the Committee of Trade or the legislature would not protect the most vulnerable members of the community in the face of "a few overbearing merchants, a swarm of monopolizers and speculators, [and] an infernal gang of Tories," then the poor would protect themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Why did Philadelphia's women not stand forth at this critical juncture as they did in Boston to parade merchant Thomas Boylston around the city in a cart and confiscate the coffee he had engrossed? There is no good answer, though one can speculate that their husbands, brothers, and sons in the militia promised to obtain justice themselves. Indeed, that is what happened. Seizing four detested merchants—John Drinker, Thomas Story, Buckridge Sims, and Matthew Johns—the militiamen paraded them around the city with a drum beating "The Rogue's March." Then they prodded them along toward the large house of James Wilson, a leading conservative lawyer, vigorous opponent of price controls, and defender of two Tories executed a year before. Ritual humiliation was the purpose of this forced march. Cooler heads tried to avert a confrontation; but Wilson, fearing that he was slated for a trip to New York on the prison ship, barricaded his house with armed friends, in-

cluding Robert Morris. Here they prepared for the militiamen, who were determined, according to one of their leaders, a poor carpenter, "to support the constitution, the laws, and the Committee of Trade."<sup>18</sup>

With bayonets fixed on their muskets, the militiamen marched by Wilson's house with their four human trophies. Then shots rang out, with conflicting accounts of who fired first. In the next ten minutes, militiamen of the artillery company rolled a cannon into position to fire on the house and tried to batter down the doors with iron bars and large hammers. From inside, Wilson's friends fired on the militiamen, and hand-to-hand fighting broke out as some militiamen poured into the house. In what became known as the Fort Wilson Riot, five were killed and fourteen wounded at Third and Walnut streets. "Poor Pennsylvania has become the most miserable spot under the surface of the globe," lamented Benjamin Rush. "Our streets have been stained already with fraternal blood—a sad prelude we fear of the future mischiefs our constitution will bring upon us."<sup>19</sup>

It was not the constitution that caused the Fort Wilson bloodshed, and it was not a riot. Rather, it was an organized, purposeful confrontation, as one militia leader put it, of "the laboring part of the city [that] had become desperate from the high prices of the necessities of life." "They call it a democracy," Rush anguished, "a mobocracy in my opinion would be more proper." Members of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia saw the bloody confrontation more realistically. A Delaware delegate wrote home: "God help us—terrible times. . . . The poor [are] starving here and rise for redress. Many flying the city for fear of vengeance."<sup>20</sup>

Trying to restore order after the bloody confrontation, Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council president Joseph Reed called for all attackers to surrender to the sheriff and submit to prosecution. After the sheriff arrested twenty-seven militiamen, continued agitation convinced authorities to release and pardon them, hoping this would heal the wounds. At the same time, the state assembly authorized distribution of flour to Philadelphia's poor with special attention paid to militiamen families. Three weeks after the bloodshed, President Reed issued a broadside warning merchants that without self-restraint, there could be no peace: Do not expect to "live in ease, plenty, and safety, while such a body of your fellow citizens were destitute of all the necessaries of life."<sup>21</sup>

Bitterness over the underlying causes of the incident continued. In the election of November 1, 1779, just four weeks after the Fort Wilson bloodshed,

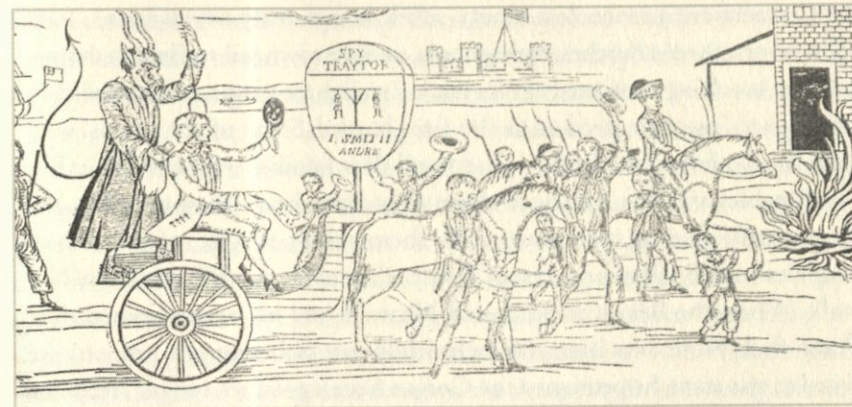


radicals won nearly every seat in the legislature, showing the widespread sympathy for the plight of the poor. But that did not bring price control legislation. Pennsylvania lawmakers continued to look to Congress to solve the problem. In April 1780, radicals plastered the city with a broadside urging militiamen to deliberate the still-rising prices and unequal militia obligations—the old sources of discontent. “We are determined to be free,” the broadside announced, and its postscript warned that anyone tearing it down would experience “the just resentment of an injured people.” Fearing another Fort Wilson, President Reed issued a proclamation forbidding the militiamen to assemble or speak out publicly and offered a one-thousand-pound reward for the identity of the author or printer. Such an enormous amount, equivalent to an urban worker’s income for several years, brought no informant forward, indicating the solidarity of the dispossessed. Congress finally acted in the spring of 1780, drastically devaluing the Continental dollar and issuing new bills, thus initiating fiscal reform.<sup>22</sup>

Philadelphia’s radicals voiced their ire one more time in the fall of 1780, turning their wrath on Benedict Arnold and his Philadelphia-born aristocratic wife. The gallant, thirty-eight-year-old Arnold had been the military commander of Philadelphia after the British decamped in June 1778, and had charmed the beautiful nineteen-year-old Peggy Shippen, daughter of one of the city’s wealthiest merchants and a distinctly Tory-leading member of the city’s conservatives, into marriage. One year after the Fort Mifflin carnage, Arnold’s treasonous plot to deliver West Point to the British had been discovered. A day after the news broke, the crowd swung into action. Erecting a life-size papier-mâché effigy of Arnold, they paraded it through the streets in a horse-drawn cart with fifes and drums providing “The Rogue’s March.” The procession culminated with a bonfire, where the crowd celebrated the unceremonious burning of Arnold’s effigy. This was patriotic revelry but also a reminder to the city’s aristocratic elite, from which Arnold had drawn his main associates for the lavish parties he hosted in 1778–79, of ordinary Philadelphians’ ownership of the streets.<sup>23</sup>

### *New Choices for African Americans*

“Altho our skins are different in color, from those whom we serve, yet reason and revelation join to declare that we are the creatures of that God, who made of one blood, and kindred, all the nations of the earth. . . . We are



*Dressed in a red coat for Loyalty, with two faces symbolizing his duplicity, Benedict Arnold is advised by a huge black devil shaking a purse of money at the traitor. One conservative Quaker dismissed the boisterous procession as “a frolick of the lowest sort of people,”\* though Charles Willson Peale, the radical leader and creator of this drawing, claimed it was led by mounted “gentlemen, Continental Army officers,” as well as “a guard of the City Infantry.”*

endowed with the same faculties with our masters, and there is nothing that leads us to a belief or suspicion that we are any more obliged to serve them than they us. . . . We can never be convinced that we were made to be slaves. . . . Is it consistent with the present claims of the United States to hold so many thousands of the race of Adam, our common father, in perpetual slavery? Can human nature endure the shocking idea?” These were the words of the enslaved Prime and Prince, on “behalf of themselves and other petitioners” in the towns of Fairfield and Stratford, Connecticut, on May 11, 1779, in a plea to the wartime state legislature. “Can your honors any longer suffer this great evil to prevail under your government? . . . We ask for nothing but what we are fully persuaded is ours to claim.”<sup>24</sup>

Eight weeks later, a British squadron, under William Tryon, no longer royal governor of New York but now organizer of New York Loyalists and commander of the British Seventieth Foot, pummeled Connecticut towns along Long Island Sound. New Haven first felt the torch. Then at Fairfield

\*Gary B. Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 98–100.



the Connecticut patriots lost ninety-seven homes, sixty-seven barns, forty-eight stores, three churches, two schools, and the town jail to British destroyers. The torching continued at Norwalk. In all three towns, slaves fled to the British, seizing their freedom as the fires burned. Some of the towns' white citizens also joined the British—men and their families who had never been comfortable with the American claim to independence. In some cases, they were unable to drag their slaves with them as they sought refuge with the king's banner. Such was the case of Pomp, slave of Jeremiah Leaming of Norwalk. While the British troops razed Norwalk and his master joined them, Pomp fled. Nine days later, still technically part of Leaming's property forfeited to the state, he petitioned the Connecticut legislature for his freedom.<sup>25</sup>

Prime, Prince, and Pomp were among the thousands of slaves who surveyed the chaotic wartime landscape, calculated the odds, and struck out to gain their freedom as the Revolution entered its fifth year in 1779. By this time, the British had shifted the war south. Stalemated in the North, their strategists hoped to win the dragged-out war by delivering blows in South Carolina and Georgia, where Loyalists were as numerous as patriots, and then drive north to smash Washington's army. For northern slaves, except those who could claim freedom under English protection in the New York City area, where the redcoats still maintained their hold, this was a blow. But just as this escape hatch closed, new ones opened up. Some northern states took steps to abolish slavery, either at a stroke or gradually, and slave masters, without legislative dictate, slowly began to grant freedom to their bondmen and bondwomen.

Pennsylvania again earned its title as the Keystone State, this time as the abolitionist vanguard. The constitutional convention of 1776 had sidestepped the controversial issue, though their Declaration of Rights included the maxim "that all men are born equally free and independent, and that they have natural, inherent, and unalienable rights"—words much referred to thereafter by those pursuing abolition. In May 1778, just before the British withdrew from Philadelphia after occupying the city for eight months, the legislature moved to implement the Declaration of Rights. Legislative moves to abolish slavery began in 1779, when Chester County's radical Committee of Correspondence petitioned the legislature to pass a gradual abolition act. For slaves in northern states, word of attempts in Pennsylvania to abolish slavery came as the biblical balm of Gilead.

It was not the Quakers who took the lead in fashioning a gradual abolition

bill but an immigrant Presbyterian. George Bryan had established himself as a small merchant in the 1750s after arriving in Philadelphia from Ireland. By 1770, he was playing a leading role in the radical Scots-Irish Presbyterian bloc that controlled state politics during the Revolution. Becoming acting president of the Supreme Executive Council in 1778, Bryan urged the legislature to consider an abolition act. Absorbed with the price control crisis and other issues, the lawmakers took no action. But Bryan kept the matter alive, reminding the legislature in November 1778 that "no period seems more happy for the attempt than the present as the number [of slaves] has been much reduced by the practices and plunder of our late invaders"—an oblique reference to the flight of hundreds of slaves to the occupying British army. Slavery was "the opprobrium of America," he chided the legislators; it astonished Europeans "to see a people eager for liberty holding Negroes in bondage."<sup>26</sup>

Rather than waiting for the legislature to write a bill, Bryan offered one of his own. He did not propose to liberate those already enslaved, but to promise freedom to those born of slave women. When the legislators took no action, the executive council prodded them again in February 1779, arguing that slavery was "disgraceful to any people, and more especially to those who have been contending in the great cause of liberty themselves." Offering something akin to immortality, the council declared that "honored will that state be in the annals of history, which shall first abolish this violation of the rights of mankind."

Though beset by the inflation and price crisis, the legislature drafted its own law in mid-1779 and ordered it printed for public discussion. There are many claimants for authorship of the bill, with Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Quaker lawyer William Lewis, and others receiving credit. Bryan's tombstone gives him the honor, though his role was mostly in shepherding the bill through the legislature. The poignant preamble contained language suggesting that Anthony Benezet was involved. In a pointed history lesson, the preamble called attention to the tragic retrogression of human progress in the New World, where "the practice of domestic slavery, so highly detrimental to morality, industry, and the arts, has been, in the instance of the natives of Africa and their descendants, in modern ages revived among Christians." Thus America had been "made the scene of his new invasion of the rights of mankind after the spirit of Christianity had abolished it from the greater part of Europe."

The specifics that followed have been celebrated in the history of antislavery



because this was the first time in America, or anywhere else, that an elected political body abolished slavery. But the abolition act of 1780 was not so altruistic as often portrayed. From the beginning, not one legislator proposed freeing a single slave, for this would raise treacherous problems regarding compensation for slave owners at a time of economic derangement. The bill called only for emancipating children born to slave women after the act took effect, and it required these children to serve, in the manner of indentured servants, until age eighteen if they were female and twenty-one if male. The law exempted congressmen and foreign ministers entering Pennsylvania with slaves, but any other person arriving with slaves must release them within six months, though they could be indentured until age twenty-eight if a minor or for seven years if an adult. The bill also banned slave importations and repealed the slave code in effect since 1726, while retaining the former legal prohibition of racially mixed marriages and the old practice of binding out free black people to servitude if they were unable to maintain themselves.

Held up for public discussion, the bill attracted plenty of opposition, particularly from nonslaveholding Germans from Lutheran and Reformed backgrounds, who dominated the agricultural hinterland in a wide arc sweeping west and north of Philadelphia. Equally opposed were slaveholding Scots and Scots-Irish Presbyterians west and south of Philadelphia. In the face of considerable opposition, the legislature took no final action on the bill, carrying it over to the next legislative session of late 1779.

The new legislature, one of the most radical ever elected in eighteenth-century America, took up the bill again, made an important concession to slave owners, and then passed it in revised form. Elected to the legislature from Philadelphia, George Bryan chaired the committee to redraft the bill. Though the language of the preamble spoke of the "sorrow of those who have lived in undeserved bondage," the new bill provided that all children born after the law took effect would serve for twenty-eight years. Compared to the initial draft, this added ten years to the term for girls and seven to that for boys in the prime of their lives. Thus, the first Pennsylvania slave born after the law took effect on January 1, 1780, would not have walked in freedom until 1808. Given the life expectancy of laboring people—one commentator, signing his name as "Phileleutheros," believed that most people "used to hard labor without doors begin to fail soon after thirty"—this provision offered Pennsylvania slave owners what historians Stanley Engerman and

Robert Fogel have called "the opportunity to engage in philanthropy at bargain prices."<sup>27</sup>

While making this concession to slave owners, the revised abolition bill extended a hand to former slaves and those with white spouses. The clause for binding out free African Americans if they could not maintain themselves was dropped and so was the ban on interracial marriage. Placed again before the public, the bill sparked another spirited debate, some arguing that it was a halfway measure that left thousands of slaves with little hope for the future, while others argued against any form of abolition as an intrusion on property rights. Conducted in the same month of the Fort Wilson bloodshed, it is remarkable that the debate occurred at all. Anthony Benezet visited every member of the legislature asking for support of the bill, and George Bryan published a set of anonymous newspaper articles appealing to religion, morality, and patriotism. By a vote of 34–21, the bill passed the third reading on March 1, 1780.

Pennsylvania's gradual abolition act of 1780 has drawn effusive praise as exemplifying the spirit of enlightened reform in the revolutionary era. The first historian of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), writing in 1847, called it a law "which for justice, humanity, and philanthropy, has seldom been equaled, and which raised the State of Pennsylvania to a high position amongst the nations of the earth."<sup>28</sup> With historical hindsight, less enthusiasm is warranted. It was, in fact, the most restrictive of the five gradual abolition laws enacted by the northern states between 1780 and 1804, mostly because of the long service—twenty-eight years—required of any child born to a slave after the law took effect. If the law was a death sentence for slavery, it was a sentence with a long grace period for slave owners. In fact, it was designed to avoid an abrupt end to slavery and to accomplish abolition at little cost to those who claimed ownership over other human beings. Legislators had found a way to satisfy those who saw slavery as inconsistent with the principles undergirding the revolutionary struggle while touching nobody's chattel property and depriving them of future human property only on a nearly cost-free basis.

The law drew sharp criticism from thoroughgoing abolitionists. New Jersey Quaker John Cooper was far from satisfied. "If we keep our present slaves in bondage and only enact laws that their posterity shall be free," he wrote in a newspaper circulating in Philadelphia, "we save that part of our tyranny



and gain of oppression, which to us, the present generation, is of the most value." Pennsylvanians were telling their slaves that "we will not do justice unto you, but our posterity shall do justice unto your posterity." A few years later, the French reformer Brissot de Warville reached the same conclusion. Why did the legislature not "extend at least the hopes of freedom to those who were slaves at the time of the passing of the . . . act?" he asked. He received the answer that slaves were property "and all property is sacred." Yet what is property "founded on robbery and plunder?" retorted the Frenchman. At the least, the legislators should have limited slavery "to a certain number of years, in order to give at least the cheap consolation of hope," or given the slave the "right of purchasing his freedom."<sup>29</sup>

Yet Pennsylvania had taken an important step that neighboring New Jersey and New York would not take for many years. The stage had been set for further action. The language of the law had condemned slavery, admitting that it deprived African Americans of "common blessings that they were by nature entitled to." Furthermore, it expressed a belief in the unitary nature of humankind—a "universal civilization." "It is not for us to enquire why, in the creation of mankind," the preamble stated, "the inhabitants of the several parts of the world were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are the work of an Almighty Hand . . . who placed them in their various situations [and] hath extended equally his care and protection to all."<sup>30</sup>

Watered down though it was, the 1780 abolition act continued to draw fire from antiabolitionists. Some slave owners refused to register their slaves, as the law required, and they raged against those slaves who had fled to claim their freedom, as guaranteed in the law, when their masters refused to register them. Opposition to the law became a factor in the political revolt of October 1780 that swept 60 percent of the previous Pennsylvania assemblymen from their seats and replaced them with more conservative representatives. This led to a hard-fought battle to save the partial abolitionist victory in the face of repeal efforts. A full-scale defense of slavery appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal* early in 1781, arguing that the Bible justified slavery and denying that "all mankind are born alike free." Free black Philadelphians, engaging in one of their first political acts, petitioned the legislature to resist rearguard attacks on the abolition act and penned newspaper appeals. Writing in *Freedom's Journal*, Cato wrote that "to make a law to hang us all would be merciful, when compared to this [proposed] law for many of our masters

would treat us with unheard of barbarity, for daring to take advantage (as we have done) of the law made in our favor." Another group of free African Americans in Philadelphia, pointing to the phrase that slaves had "lived in undeserved bondage," declared their confidence that "this honorable house, possessed of such sentiments of humanity and benevolence," would not pass an act to reenslave those who had gained their freedom. In a close vote of 27 to 21, the legislature defeated an attempt to dismantle the first legislative action against slavery in the new nation. Now the law gained unquestioned acceptance in the state.<sup>31</sup>

The most dedicated antislavery advocates held to the belief that a half victory was insufficient because immorality and un-Christian behavior should not be half-corrected. Anthony Benezet carried the banner forward even when others rested, content with the progress already made. He kept peppering the public with appeals to end slavery and the slave trade unequivocally. In June 1782, the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* published his letter to Abbe Raynal, the aristocratic French reformer, calling for an abolition of slavery, along with Raynal's approving reply. Two months later, Benezet's moving plea calling for the end of "the galling chains, the cruel stripes, the dying groan" of slavery lest America lose its soul appeared in the *Pennsylvania Packet*. But by now, most white Pennsylvanians were content to rest on their laurels, and death would soon remove Benezet from the scene.

South of Pennsylvania, some 400,000 slaves looked not to southern legislatures for freedom but to the British army. From New Year's Day in 1779, when the British southern campaign began with the capture of Savannah, Georgia, until the final capitulation at Yorktown in October 1781, African Americans struggled to take advantage of the massive tearing of the social fabric in the South. With British forces, Loyalist Americans, and patriot Americans engaged in the ugliest, bloodiest, and most destructive warfare of the Revolution, opportunity beckoned for slaves as never before in the long history of North American bondage.

British strategists selected Georgia as the base from which the southern states could be severed from the North because it was brimming with Loyalist Americans. If this separation was successful, they believed, American resistance would crumble. By land and sea attack from East Florida, the British required only a month to gain control of Georgia. For 15,000 slaves, this victory had little to offer, for most of them were the property of white Loyalists, whom the British could not afford to violate. Slaves who belonged to white



patriots had a better chance at freedom, but a mass exodus of patriots fleeing the British carried most of them out of the state. William Moultrie, an American officer, described "the poor women and children, and negroes of Georgia, many thousands of whom I saw. . . , traveling to they knew not where."<sup>32</sup>

Yet in this chaotic situation, slaves imagined for a brief moment that the desperation of Georgia and South Carolina patriots might work to their advantage. Hope arose out of one of the boldest steps of the entire war taken by Congress—one that had the promise of riveting together the War of Independence with the revolution to reform America. In March 1779 (and again in December), considering the pillaging and plundering British sweeping across the Georgia border into South Carolina, Congress urged the two southernmost states to raise "three thousand able-bodied negroes" to help repulse the British. Congress promised to compensate masters for each released slave. The slaves themselves would receive no enlistment bounty or pay; but if they served "well and faithfully" and survived the war, they would receive their freedom and fifty dollars each. Not for another eighty years would the nation's government again propose the military recruitment of slaves and underwrite their manumission.<sup>33</sup>

Eager to supervise the recruitment was the twenty-five-year-old South Carolinian John Laurens, scion of one of the colony's wealthiest and most politically powerful figures, aide-de-camp to George Washington, and a visionary reformer who hoped that American independence would eventually break the chains of half a million slaves. Laurens knew firsthand that black men would fight bravely, for he saw them in the thick of battle at Newport in August 1778, where the contingent Laurens led fought almost alongside Rhode Island's First Regiment, mostly composed of black men. A few months after this, Laurens had urged a compensated emancipation of slaves who would promise to fight against the British in all-black regiments. This would reward "those who are unjustly deprived of the rights of mankind." New Hampshire's William Whipple, delegate to the Continental Congress, agreed with Laurens that if the plan was now implemented, "it will produce the emancipation of a number of those wretches and lay a foundation for the abolition of slavery in America." Alexander Hamilton and many others in Washington's military family circle endorsed the plan. So did Henry Laurens, John Laurens's father and president of the Continental Congress from November 1777 to December 1778. Both father and son knew that white soldiers, even militiamen, were nearly unrecruitable for action against the Brit-

ish because they were "at home to prevent insurrections among the Negroes and prevent the desertion of them to the enemy," as Daniel Huger, South Carolina delegate to the Continental Congress, reminded everyone.<sup>34</sup>

Washington withheld support of this astonishing idea of enlisting slaves with a promise of freedom, a notion heretofore unthinkable because it conjured up the specter of black men under arms who would become the vanguard of an uncontrollable liberation movement. Thinking of his own slaves, who at the moment he was considering selling, Washington feared that enlisting slaves would "render slavery more irksome to those who remain in it." Writing directly to John Laurens, he continued: "[M]ost of the good and evil things of this life are judged of by comparison; and I fear a comparison in this case will be productive of much discontent of those who are held in servitude."<sup>35</sup>

It is possible that Washington's support of the plan would have convinced South Carolina and Georgia's planter-politicians to accept it, which would have changed the entire character of the American Revolution. This was unlikely because the horror at the prospect of black men under arms was real. Yet Washington's enormous prestige has been noted repeatedly by historians, and it is one of the staples of the "great man" theory of history that such a figure often triggers epic historical turning points. Absent Washington's support, Congress's proposal "was received with great resentment," huffed Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina, "as a very dangerous and impolitic step." South Carolina's council was so indignant that it considered sending a flag of truce to British general Augustine Prevost, when it appeared that the city would be overwhelmed or beaten down with a siege. Under the white flag, South Carolinians would quit the war for independence to preserve their dependence on slavery. Writing her history of the American Revolution after the war, Mercy Otis Warren condemned the Carolinians' surrender offer as "the only instance in America of an offer made so derogatory to the honor of the nation."<sup>36</sup>

Amidst great confusion and wholesale violence, as the British army swept into South Carolina, the soft underbelly of the South, in spring 1779, thousands of slaves fled. Some sought refuge in the woods and swamps; others took to roads knowing not where they might find shelter; others tried to reach British units, hoping that Dunmore's Proclamation, issued hundreds of miles to the north more than three years ago, would cover them. Some carried stolen arms, others fled on stolen horses. Many women with small



children were among them. Henry Laurens thought one-third of the 80,000 South Carolina slaves made a break for freedom. Always, their flight was perilous. Patriot militia units often intercepted them and returned them to their masters, if the masters were on the American side. Others biding their time with Loyalist masters found themselves seized by patriot units and claimed as booty. In one case, patriot raiders fell on the lightly protected plantation of the royal lieutenant governor John Graham outside Savannah and carried off 130 slaves along with all of his horses. Transferred from a Loyalist master to a patriot master, many of them fled and ended up as laborers in the British army, where they hauled provisions, cleared roads, and dug latrines. A few who knew the terrain served as scouts, spies, and pilots. In some cases, particularly in the unsuccessful American attempt to recapture Savannah in September and October of 1779, the British gave slaves who had reached their lines their freedom and formed them into companies of armed black volunteers. Some of them faced other armed blacks when several hundred French-speaking freedmen from Saint Domingue arrived with a French fleet to support the American attempt to recapture Savannah. In a further attempt to regain the city in April 1780, American forces engaged with about four hundred former slaves under British arms.<sup>37</sup>

In the siege of Charleston in May 1780, slaves played a role on both sides of the battle. Those captured by the British as they approached the city were equipped with shovels and axes to prepare for the siege. Likewise, inside Charleston, the slaves of American patriots did most of the fortification building, though they proved to be too few in number. John Laurens, trying to defend the city, lamented the thin forces available to him—"far too few for defending works [fortifications] of nearly three miles in circumference . . . and many of the Continental troops half naked."<sup>38</sup> Laurens himself fell prisoner to the British, and was released in a prisoner exchange six months later.

In what many historians regard as the most ignominious defeat of the war, the American surrender on May 11, 1780, led the English command to make a decision that shaped the fate of thousands of South Carolina slaves. Attempting to pacify the sprawling South Carolina interior, Sir Henry Clinton moved "to use slaves as weapons against their masters." Even before leaving Philipsburg, New York, to lead the British forces south by sea in mid-1779, Clinton implemented this strategy by issuing a proclamation pledging that all slaves *seized* from American rebels would be sold for the benefit of British combatants but that all slaves *fleeing* the American rebels would be accepted

into British military service with "full security to follow within these lines any occupation which he shall think proper."<sup>39</sup> Like Dunmore's Proclamation, the Philipsburg Proclamation was more an announcement of military strategy than a pronouncement of abolitionist principles. Its fourfold purpose was to weaken the southern rebels by bleeding off their main labor source, to bulk up British manpower, to maintain morale among British officers by awarding them captured slaves, and to hold the allegiance of white southern Loyalists by respecting their slave property. It differed from Dunmore's Proclamation in one crucial respect: Slaves seized from American rebels would not be given freedom.

As mentioned above, the British were careful not to offend the Loyalist support they so badly needed. When the fleeing slaves of southern Loyalists reached their lines, British commanders regularly returned them to their owners as soon as they discovered the slaves' identities. In many cases, they sold slaves captured from patriot masters back to the Americans in order to purchase supplies for the army with no qualms of conscience.

Far from demoralizing white patriots in South Carolina, the Philipsburg Proclamation further aroused them. It also plunged the South into what many historians regard as the fiercest, most savage phase of the American Revolution, in which far more deaths occurred through fratricidal combat than through British-American combat. Historian Sylvia Frey calls this the "triangular war" among white patriots of the Lower South, the British and their loyal followers, and the slaves. With the triumphant British threatening to seize their slaves unless they renounced their allegiance to the American cause, thousands of patriot planters, including many of the former leaders of the American cause, took an oath of fealty to England's king in order to keep their slaves. The idea of independence had its limits.<sup>40</sup>

For slaves, the massive British military presence presented the opportunity of a lifetime. But they did not flee en masse to the British. Many feared reprisals of their kinfolk if they deserted, and the uncertainty about what fate awaited them if they reached British lines must have gnawed at many. Yet large numbers took their chances on the freedom that the Philipsburg Proclamation promised. Some fled alone, some in pairs, some in families and in large groups. Old Ross, a fifty-six-year-old Ibo woman, led two of her daughters, a son-in-law, a son, a granddaughter, and four nonfamily members to the British lines.<sup>41</sup> In another case, sixteen slaves fled the plantation of Andrew Lord, a Charleston slave merchant. Rawlin Lowndes, one of South



Carolina's wealthiest slave owners, lost thirty-four slaves in March 1780, and most of his neighbors in the area also lost many slaves. David George, a former slave who later became a Baptist missionary in Sierra Leone, recalled in his autobiographical account how his master fled his plantation as the British approached, leaving the slaves to fend for themselves. George, his wife, two children, and about fifty other "of my master's people" walked "about twenty miles . . . [to] where the King's forces were." Boston King, another South Carolina slave, who met up with David George in Nova Scotia after the war, remembered how he fled to the British after his master promised a severe beating.<sup>42</sup>

Many slaves who reached the British lines found opportunities to practice the crafts they learned on American plantations. Wheelwrights, carpenters, blacksmiths, wagon builders, sawyers, and butchers served the British in camp and in the field. British officers put black women to work making cartridges for muskets and serving as nurses in field hospitals. Hundreds of other fleeing or captured slaves were assigned to British officers in a ranked system where senior officers had four to six semiservile attendants, noncommissioned officers had at least one attendant, and nearly every soldier had a black carrier who lugged provisions and equipment. A Hessian officer described how even white women accompanying British officers had their black attendants.<sup>43</sup> The wife of David George served as washerwoman for one Loyalist company of troops, while Boston King served one stint as the body servant of a British officer.

Black refugees served the British most importantly as organized foraging parties. When supplies ran low, the king's troops lived off the countryside, and slaves knew the terrain much better than the British. By one report, Cornwallis's army, on its march north through North Carolina in the spring of 1780, sent two thousand black foragers afield to seize anything edible. One British officer may have exaggerated the case in claiming that "Negroes who flock to the conquerors . . . do ten thousand times more mischief than the whole army put together"; but it is doubtless that the thousands who took refuge with the British added significantly to the British war machine.<sup>44</sup>

Near the end of the war, the British took a step they had previously employed sparingly—militarizing the black refugees. Preparing to evacuate Charleston, they formed black military units, usually led by white officers but occasionally with black captains. About seven hundred strong, the Black Dragoons, as they were called, battled white South Carolinians in the last

stages of the war in early 1782. Though they inflicted limited damage on the rebel South Carolinians, they raised the possibility that the sight of armed black men would encourage the patriots' slaves to think of themselves in the same way.

In the latter stages of the war, slaves became the victims of a free-for-all among American soldiers turned bounty hunters. Desperate for recruits by 1781, American general Thomas Sumter offered "one grown negro" to every militiaman who would promise to serve for ten months and "three large and one small negro" to officers. Civil authorities followed suit in trying to raise recruits for Washington's Continental army. Attempting to raise a modest 1,300 men in early 1782, South Carolina's legislature promised even the poorest white enlistee a slave between the ages of ten and forty confiscated from Loyalist estates. Used as "wartime money," as historian Benjamin Quarles puts it, slaves found themselves commodified even more than in peacetime.<sup>45</sup>

Such promises of a slave bonus were not easy to keep because many Loyalists had fled with their best slaves, leaving behind only the infirm and aged. So the slave-bonus system limped along with both militia and Continental army quartermasters always in arrears, just as they were in salary payments. Colonel William Hill, for example, dunned the state government for seventy-three large and three and a half small Negroes due his regiment. Colonel Wade Hampton's men were in arrears by ninety-three and three-quarters grown slaves and "three quarters of a small Negro." For a decade after the war, attempts to indemnify men shorted their slave bonus in 1781–82 clogged the courts.<sup>46</sup> South Carolina's patriots and Loyalists fought for lofty principles, but they battled even more for slave property.

We will never know the fate of thousands of slaves who, through several years of fratricidal war in the Lower South, were seized as war booty by one side or the other. How many slaves reached the British lines cannot be determined with precision. Writing from firsthand experience in the war, South Carolina's David Ramsay believed that when the British first invaded the state in the spring of 1779, fleeing slaves "collected in great crowds, near the royal army," which he estimated at three thousand, almost as large as the British army itself.<sup>47</sup> Ramsay's judgment was that by the end of the war some 20,000 (of about 80,000) slaves in South Carolina had reached the British lines. A Pennsylvanian transplanted to South Carolina, Ramsay welcomed this because he hoped it would impel the Carolinians to stop their folly of



"accumulating negroes" and turn instead to "encouraging the settlement of poor white people." King George III, he wrote Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia sardonically, "for once in his life is promoting the grand cause of American liberty and republicanism . . . by diminishing the number of slaves."<sup>48</sup> The most careful modern historian of black revolutionary experience in the South agrees that slaves striking out for freedom "streamed in like a tidal flood, their sheer numbers overwhelming the [British] army." Whatever the number, it is certain that a great many of them, probably a majority, died, particularly after smallpox broke out in Charleston in November 1779 and raged through the countryside, laying waste to the uninoculated, both black and white.<sup>49</sup>

The hopes of thousands of slaves for a better future by fleeing to the British were shattered by rampant disease that struck the British army recurrently during the southern campaign of 1779–81. Typhus, dysentery, smallpox, and typhoid, familiar camp fevers, killed white and black combatants alike in the makeshift camps. But in dire circumstances, the British also abandoned sick ex-slaves, consigning them to almost certain death. This occurred in 1779 when General Augustine Prevost's army retreated down the Georgia off-shore islands. Without medical attention and sufficient rations, hundreds of fever-stricken former slaves were left to die on Otter Island. A year later, the most severe smallpox epidemic in seventeen years swept through South Carolina, cutting down thousands of black refugees in the British camps. When the British thrust pox-infected blacks out of their camps in an effort to prevent the grim disease from spreading, hundreds died and were left unburied in wooded areas. Boston King was one of those sent a mile from Charleston and left to fend for himself.

Some fifteen to twenty thousand slaves in South Carolina responded to the half promise of freedom hinted at in the Philipsburg Proclamation, testimony to the slaves' willingness to gamble on even the *possibility* of emancipation. Certain that they and their children would never see freedom, unlikely odds often seemed better than none. But only a fraction of the many thousands who fled achieved full liberty. When British military strategists decided to hold only Savannah and Charleston and strike north through North Carolina to Virginia in August 1780, some four to five thousand black males and females of all ages trudged behind the baggage train of Lord Cornwallis to meet an uncertain fate. Thousands of others remained, to be evacuated from Savannah and Charleston in July 1782. Most of them sailed away as slaves,

thousands of them with their white Loyalist masters and thousands more as the contraband property of British officers. Most landed ashore in East Florida and Jamaica, once again to toil as field laborers. Only a small minority—perhaps a thousand or so—went as free men and women to pursue lives largely hidden to historians to this very day.<sup>50</sup>

For about 230,000 slaves in Virginia (nearly half of all North American slaves), five years had passed since Lord Dunmore had issued his famous freedom proclamation in late 1775, inspiring hundreds of bondpeople to flee to his banner. But when the war unfolded in other regions, not to return to Virginia until 1780, they lost the chance to cash in on Dunmore's offer. British naval forces intermittently conducted spoiling operations along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay from 1777 to 1780, stirring the hopes of slaves for freedom. However, only in small numbers could they escape their masters and commandeer small craft to reach the British vessels.

The prospects for slaves changed radically when British schooners and barges began maneuvering up the rivers flowing into the Chesapeake in November 1780. "Slaves flock[ed] to them from every quarter" as the British swept ashore to burn houses and barns, reported a local planter. This was the opportunity Virginia slaves had been waiting for since 1775. Whereas Governor Dunmore had fled Williamsburg to operate from a royal ship at Norfolk, which made it possible only for slaves in a small geographical area to reach his forces, the rampaging British now operated over a vast part of tidewater Virginia and westward into Virginia's hilly interior. This opened the way for massive slave defections, as became apparent in January 1781 when Benedict Arnold's squadron, with 1,600 men, made it all the way up the James River to Richmond. Coming ashore, they plundered the region and opened the gates for fleeing slaves. James Madison's father wrote him that "families within the sphere of his [Arnold's] action have suffered greatly. Some have lost 40, others 30, and one a considerable part of their slaves." In March 1781, Arnold continued his forays in the James River area, and once again, reported Robert Honyman, a Hanover County physician, slaves "flocked to the enemy from all quarters, even from very remote parts." Many planters lost from thirty to seventy slaves, along with cattle, horses, and sheep.<sup>51</sup>

British raids up the Potomac River in April 1781 brought more new opportunities for Virginia slaves. Robert Carter, one of the largest planters of the area, lost thirty of his unresisting slaves when a British warship landed at



his Cole's Point plantation. Sailing to the landing of Washington's Mount Vernon plantation, the British sloop *Savage* carried off fourteen enslaved men and three women. In the face of this onslaught, hundreds of tidewater planters loaded their most valuable possessions in wagons and headed for the piedmont region with slaves in tow, trying to move beyond the reach of the British forces. Jefferson, wartime governor of Virginia, was not spared. In Goochland County, Cornwallis made his headquarters at Jefferson's Elk Hill plantation, and for ten days his troops, accompanied by escaped slave foragers, destroyed barns and rustled cattle, sheep, hogs, and horses. When they left, Black Sall, three of her children, and fifteen more of Jefferson's slaves joined the British. Twelve others fled from his Cumberland County plantation. When Cornwallis dispatched Banastre Tarleton's dragoons to capture Jefferson and members of the Virginia legislature who had retreated to Charlottesville, Jefferson escaped with his family, but four of his Monticello slaves, including Old Jenny, decamped with the British. Richard Henry Lee counted the loss of slaves on other plantations: forty-five from the plantation of his brother William Lee, all of the slaves of Richard Taliaferro and Edward Travis, and all but one slave of John Paradise. Thomas Nelson, Jefferson's successor as governor of Virginia, lost all but eighty to one hundred of his seven hundred slaves, according to Ludwig von Closen, a German officer who served with French troops. "This is the general case of all those who were near the enemy," Lee wrote to his brother in July 1781. Hessian officer Johann Ewald believed "well over four thousand Negroes of both sexes and all ages" were now part of Cornwallis's army.<sup>52</sup>

Virginia's stricken plantation owners liked to think that the British compelled their slaves to abandon them. "Whenever 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," noted Robert Honyman in his diary. Richard Henry Lee was indignant that "force, fraud, intrigue, theft, have all in turn been employed to delude these unhappy people and to defraud their masters!"<sup>53</sup> But this was usually not the case. It was hardly unknown to enslaved Virginians that the British were motivated by short-range military tactics—bleeding off the labor of the patriots that undergirded their economy and eager to provide themselves with refugee slaves to do the brunt of the drudge work—rather than long-term benevolence. Nor were slaves unaware that life on British ships and in makeshift camps was dangerous and

difficult and that lethal diseases often mowed down appalling numbers of people in the army, always on the move.

Yet whenever Cornwallis's army approached, slaves determined to make their move could have fled *from* the British rather than *toward* them. This happened in some cases, as slaves, acting "under the combined weight of prudence, caution fear, and realism," as historian Sylvia Frey puts it, remained with their masters as the British approached.<sup>54</sup> But those who struck for their freedom in the face of unfavorable odds were hardly "deluded," as Richard Henry Lee believed, and most would doubtlessly have laughed at the notion that they were "defrauding" their masters. Almost all slaves in the path of the onrushing British army had the opportunity to make a conscious choice: to flee or not to flee. The majority stayed where they were; but we need to appreciate that a great many of these stay-at-homes were children too young to make any kind of move, pregnant or suckling women with limited chances of surviving a flight to the British, disabled and elderly slaves with limited physical capabilities, and an abundance of others who prized the place where they lived and feared the uncertainty of life with the rarely reliable British. But slaves by the tens of thousands had waited years for the British army to move into sight. Believing that this was their best chance, they demonstrated an unquenchable thirst for freedom by fleeing to the British on the eve of the momentous military climax at Yorktown.

A particularly vivid account, scribbled in the diary of a Hessian officer far away from home, gives insight into how the most intrepid slaves, both women and men, fled to the British lines and exacted their pound of flesh from their tormentors. Officer Johann Ewald described how escaped slaves reaching British camps or going out on foraging expeditions plundered the wardrobes of their masters and mistresses with great relish. They "divided the loot, and clothed themselves piecemeal with it," he wrote. "A completely naked Negro wore a pair of silk breeches, another a finely colored coat, a third a silk vest without sleeves, a fourth an elegant shirt, a fifth a fine churchman's hat, and a sixth a wig. All the rest of the body was bare!" Here was a demonstration of primitive justice. "The one Negress wore a silk skirt, another a lounging robe with a long train, the third a jacket, the fourth a silk-laced bodice, the fifth a silk corset, the seventh, eight, and ninth—all different styles of hats and coiffures." The overall tableau amazed Ewald: "These variegated creatures on thousands of horses" trailing behind the British army's



baggage train reminded him of "a wandering Arabian or Tart[a]r horde."<sup>55</sup> For slaves who for years had little but skimpy and worn clothing, here was one of freedom's rewards, momentary to be sure, but nonetheless sweet.

But the gamble for freedom in the heart of the Virginia slave country was almost at an end. Decamping from Richmond and moving down the James River, Cornwallis's army reached Williamsburg on June 25, 1781. After occupying the small town for ten days, the British general moved his army on to Jamestown and then in August to the small tobacco port of Yorktown. Forming several thousand black refugees into shovel brigades, Cornwallis built stout fortifications, where his seven thousand troops prepared to do battle with the French naval force moving into the Chesapeake Bay and the American land forces gathering to lay siege. Meanwhile, even before they reached Yorktown, hundreds of absconding slaves were struck down by a terrifying outbreak of smallpox. "Within these days past, I have marched by 18 or 20 Negroes that lay dead by the wayside, putrifying with the small pox," noted a Connecticut soldier. Others, similarly infected, marched on to Yorktown, where Cornwallis put them to work building redoubts.<sup>56</sup>

The siege that began on September 28, 1781, soon made hunger the biggest problem for Cornwallis, but disease was not far behind. When feed ran out, Cornwallis ordered hundreds of horses slaughtered and thrown into the York River. Then, with rations dwindling for his troops, he expelled thousands of black auxiliaries from the encampments. Hessian officer Johann Ewald found this shameful. "We had used them to good advantage and set them free, and now, with fear and trembling, they had to face the reward of their cruel masters." Ewald found "a great number of these unfortunates" half-starved and hiding in the woods. Joseph Plumb Martin, the private we have encountered before, also saw "herds of Negroes" in the woods, "scattered about in every direction, dead and dying with pieces of ears of burnt Indian corn in the hands and mouths, even of those that were dead." But Cornwallis was not so merciless as it appears. With surrender imminent, every black man and woman was a hairbreadth away from certain return to slavery. Forced out of the British fortifications, the black refugees at least had a chance of making an escape. General Charles O'Hara, a senior officer in Cornwallis's army, remembered leaving four hundred black refugees with provisions to get them through smallpox and placing them in "the most friendly quarter in our neighborhood," where he begged "local residents to be kind to the refugees he had once sheltered."<sup>57</sup>

When the Americans and French entered Yorktown on October 19, they found "an immense number of Negroes" lying dead "in the most miserable manner" from smallpox. Within days of the British surrender, planters descended on Yorktown and began hiring American soldiers to ferret surviving ex-slaves out of the woods. Private Joseph Martin was among those who accepted a guinea (twenty-one shillings) per head for those he rounded up. Writing of his wartime experiences much later, he remembered how some of the American soldiers would not hand over the former slaves of John Banister, a Virginia planter and legislator, "unless he would promise not to punish them."<sup>58</sup>

Thus ended the greatest tragedy of the American Revolution for African Americans. Those expelled from the British fortifications at Yorktown had little chance for escape, and even that chance had been severely minimized by the raging smallpox epidemic that stalked Cornwallis's march eastward from Richmond to Yorktown. Seven years later, Jefferson estimated that about 27,000 of some 30,000 Virginia slaves who fled to the British died of smallpox and camp fevers. Historians have argued recently that Jefferson greatly exaggerated the number of absconding Virginia slaves at 30,000. Current research suggests one-third that many. But the patriarch of Monticello was right about the horrendous effect of smallpox. The fate of his own absconding slaves was probably typical. Of the thirty-four who fled to the British, at least fifteen died from typhus and smallpox. He recovered nine others after the Yorktown surrender and sold or gave most of them away within a few years.<sup>59</sup> The others escaped and were lost to him—and to history. The British southern campaign, meant to bring the Americans to their knees, marked the greatest slave rebellion in American history. Though a remarkable testimony to the slaves' courage and their determination to be free, disease and the outcome of the Yorktown siege put most of the black refugees in shallow graves after only the briefest taste of partial freedom.

### *Defending Virginia*

After the British moved the war south in late 1778, Virginia's middling and poor citizens faced some of the class inequities that had left Philadelphia's cobblestones stained with blood in 1779. Depreciation of paper money and the corresponding price increases were not so much the problem, because farmers fared better than urban workers in this kind of deranged economy.



Rather, tensions and violence within the patriot ranks sprang from the old problem of mobilizing citizen-soldiers. In the early years of war, the gentry-controlled legislature, leavened by some middle-class representatives, relied primarily on bounties in order to supply Virginia's quota for the Continental army. When insufficient numbers of the unmarried, the young, and especially the poor enlisted voluntarily, the legislature instituted a partial draft whereby magistrates in each county would "fix upon and draught" for three-year terms men who in their judgment could "be best spared and will be most serviceable"—the "lazy fellows who lurk about and are pests to society."<sup>60</sup> In actuality this was not a draft but an impressment system that shielded the gentry and middle classes entirely from Continental army service. Thus, by 1777, Virginia had abandoned the idea of citizen-soldiers and moved to the European view that a professional army built from the ranks of the poor was a necessity.

But the poor were not cooperative; they resisted the draft, deserted by droves once in the army, and in some western counties were as likely to join Loyalist bands as fall in for patriot militia duty. When a draft lottery was instituted in tidewater counties in 1781, a thousand men stormed Northumberland County Courthouse near the Potomac to break up the proceedings. Several thousand more broke up draft proceedings at Accomac County Courthouse in spring 1781. Similarly, in the interior, crowds of ordinary farmers and artisans, wielding clubs and poles, chased off military recruiters.<sup>61</sup> In many counties, sheriffs could collect no taxes to support mobilization.

By 1778–79, Virginia had to offer higher bounties and shorter terms of service. For gentlemen such as Edmund Pendleton, the lower class's insistence on larger enlistment bounties and eighteen-month rather than three-year terms of service showed how the "demon of avarice and spirit of extortion seem to have expelled the pure patriotism from the breasts of those who usually compose armies." The notion of the state's cellar dwellers practicing extortion against slave- and land-rich Virginians was novel, but there is a kernel of truth in it; the poor were unwilling to fight for the upper and middle classes, who rarely joined the Continental army, unless decently compensated for putting their lives on the line. Even larger bounties and shorter enlistment contracts brought meager results. By March 1778, in the heart of Patrick Henry's Hanover County, Robert Honyman noted that the recruiting plan "scarce advances at all" with "none at all offering for that service." Two

months later, Virginia had fulfilled only about one-third of the quota requested by Congress—a "horrible deficiency," in Washington's view. One army chaplain believed that "Virginia makes the poorest figure of any state in the recruiting way."<sup>62</sup>

With the British invasion imminent in late 1779, Virginians turned to their county-based militia for home defense. But here, too, class antagonism complicated mobilization. In theory, all men between the ages of sixteen and sixty were responsible for militia duty, and indeed the names of a large proportion of them were inscribed on the militia rolls. But over the course of the war, the willingness to respond to calls to arms ebbed away. If many of the lowest class of Virginians had resisted service in the Continental army, would they and middle-class Virginians in militia units ride to the sound of British guns? Virginia's legislators had reason to doubt this because, by 1780, they were beset with remonstrances and petitions complaining of the burdens the war was placing on common farmers. Virginia commoners complained especially of the high taxes imposed to provide generous bounties that would entice the lower class into the regular army. On top of this, militia call-outs caused "great uneasiness and disquiet in the country," as Berkeley County militiamen complained in November 1780. "Harrassed" with call-outs that took them away from their fields and their families, they hoped that the state could turn to "that class of men" who "depend upon the [military] field for his living."<sup>63</sup>

The debate over defending Virginia was thus conducted against a background of militia protests concerning the class injustice that had hampered wartime mobilization all along. In early 1780, for example, the Charlotte County militia petitioned the state legislature that "the poor among us who scarce obtain a precarious subsistence by the sweat of their brow are called upon as often and bound to perform equal military duty in defense of their little as the great and opulent in defense of their abundance." But in fact the opulent frequently did not do their part because they "often find means to screen themselves altogether from those military services which the poor and indigent are on all occasions taken from their homes to perform in person."<sup>64</sup> Many other petitions charged Virginia's upper class with armchair patriotism, demonstrated by their reluctance to take the field.

With Cornwallis's armies pushing from the Chesapeake Bay deep into the Virginia interior in 1780, the state's legislature looked desperately for a way to



dip deeper into the reservoir of manpower. How could Virginians be induced to defend their own state? The assembly had three choices: Compel all Virginians to share equally in the military burden; lure the lower and middling people into service while shielding the gentry; or free enslaved Virginians to fill the depleted ranks of white men.

With no time for further dallying, the legislature considered a radical plan advanced by representative Joseph Jones, wealthy delegate to the Continental Congress. Sensitive to the class-based complaints of Virginia's lower ranks that the land- and slave-rich planters were the state's most culpable war dodgers, Jones proposed that each enlistee receive, in addition to the land bounty of three hundred acres, a healthy slave between the ages of ten and forty years. These "bounty slaves" would come from slave owners with more than twenty slaves, each of whom would surrender every twentieth slave. Masters would be compensated by deducting from their taxes over the next eight years the appraised value of the slave. In effect, Jones was asking the legislature, which he believed had few slaveholders with as many as twenty slaves, to raise an army fighting for liberty through a modest redistribution of the state's slave property.

From gentrified Virginians came howls of protest. Jones wrote Madison that the "Negro holders in general already clamour against the project and will encounter it with all their force." Narrowly defeated, the bill was modified. Each enlistee would receive a land bounty at the end of the war, enough to enfranchise him, and either sixty pounds in specie (gold or silver) or a slave between the ages of ten and thirty. Some Virginia gentlemen, including James Madison, objected to the perversity of luring soldiers to fight for liberty with bounties of shackled dark-skinned men and women. "Would it not be as well," he wrote legislator Jones, "to liberate and make soldiers at once of the blacks themselves as to make them instruments for enlisting white soldiers?" This, thought Madison, would "certainly be more consonant to the principles of liberty which ought never to be lost sight of in a contest for liberty." But compromising the principles of liberty was not what worried most of the gentry; rather, it was a plan that would redistribute the state's slaves and might even "bring on a revolution in this state," as Theodorick Bland, a Virginia delegate to Congress, put it.

Nonetheless, the law took effect in October 1780 as Cornwallis's army approached. Giving up on the notion of the slave as soldier, Virginia's legislature turned to the plan for slaves as bounty. Even with a much enhanced bounty

plan, the mobilization barely worked. Surveying the scene in May 1781, with Cornwallis penetrating Virginia's interior, Baron von Steuben judged that "The opposition to the law in some counties, the entire neglect of it in others, and an unhappy disposition to evade the fair execution of it in all [counties] afford a very melancholy prospect."<sup>65</sup>

That class rifts had compromised Virginians' attempts at mobilization to counter the British invasion became apparent as soon as Benedict Arnold's British contingent of 1,200 men landed at Hampton Roads on December 30, 1780. Using captured boats, Arnold's men pushed up the James and Chickahominy rivers. General Thomas Nelson's militiamen were no match for the Queen's Rangers led by Colonel John Simcoe. Simcoe's Rangers routed the Virginia militiamen at Richmond on January 5, 1781, put the torch to part of the town, and quickly scattered another militia unit at Charles County Courthouse three days later. Washington sent Baron von Steuben south with Lafayette in an effort to encircle Arnold's forces, but von Steuben first had to shape up the Virginians into a real fighting force. What he encountered must have made him wish he was back at Valley Forge in the bitter winter three years before. Von Steuben thought he could pull together five thousand militiamen, and this was not an unrealistic number given Virginia's white population of 280,000, the second largest of the thirteen states. At one county courthouse where a militia call-out was supposed to have produced five hundred men, he was shocked to find five men awaiting him, three of whom quickly deserted.<sup>66</sup>

Later in the spring of 1781, Virginia militiamen again disgraced themselves. They put up a mild struggle before relinquishing Petersburg to Simcoe's Queen's Rangers on April 25. Only the arrival of Lafayette with 1,200 Continentals, mostly from New England and New Jersey, kept Richmond from falling to the British again. Von Steuben minced no words: "I shall always regret that circumstances induced me to undertake the defense of a country where Caesar and Hannibal would have lost their reputation, and where every farmer is a general but where nobody wishes to be a soldier."<sup>67</sup>

The summer of 1781 brought a final chance for Virginia's militiamen to redeem themselves. The young, Oxford-trained Banastre Tarleton, feared throughout the South for his rapierlike light-cavalry strikes, made a lightning assault on Charlottesville on June 4, having moved 150 miles west from Cornwallis's main army near Jamestown. The Virginia militia had plenty of chances to resist as Tarleton's strike force moved thirty to forty miles a day



through Petersburg, Amelia Court House, Prince Edward Court House, Charlotte, New London, and Bedford. As Tarleton's "army mounted on race-horses," as Lafayette described the British legion, moved to capture Governor Thomas Jefferson and the Virginia legislature, the state's government fled en masse to the hills, aided not in the least by Virginia militiamen. The Virginia militia had proved worthless. The most recent historian of the militia calls this "the almost complete breakdown of mobilization in Virginia."<sup>68</sup> Only Daniel Morgan's North Carolina riflemen and the arrival of General Anthony Wayne with the Pennsylvania Continentals crimped Tarleton and other British units.

One of the reasons for the abysmal militia turnouts was that too many officers, and some of the enlisted men, were fearful of leaving farms and plantations in the hands of slaves who were flocking to the British whenever the redcoated army appeared. Writing just after the war, Edmund Randolph, to become the state's governor in 1786, excused the militia's nonperformance because the "helpless wives and children were at the mercy not only of the males among the slaves but of the very women, who could handle deadly weapons, and these could not have been left in safety in the absence of all authority of the masters and of union among neighbors." Protecting slave property had trumped the common defense of Virginia. When the British raided Hampton, in Elizabeth City County, in the fall of 1780, militia officers didn't even try to keep the rank and file under arms. "Every man who had a family" could fall out and "do the best for them they could," county officials informed the legislature. James Innes told Jefferson that "no aid of militia could ever be drawn from the part of the country immediately invaded."<sup>69</sup> In one of the greatest ironies of the American Revolution, Virginians decided that controlling their slave property was more important than fighting the British for independence in the seventh year of the war. If necessary, they would make terms with the British, at least temporarily, rather than see themselves stripped of slaves.

As Tarleton's and Arnold's regiments approached, many planters packed their valuables, gathered their slaves, and moved "up the country" to escape the British. In late May, Robert Honyman noted in his diary that many Virginians were moving their "Negroes, cattle, horses etc. from the route which it is supposed they [the British] will take." Such famous patriots as Richard Henry Lee, George Mason, and Edmund Pendleton fled for the hills. Those who didn't suffered the fate of John Banister. During the first Tarleton raid

on Petersburg, eleven of Banister's slaves fled to the British; when the redcoats returned in early May, all his other slaves took to their heels.<sup>70</sup>

The paramount desire of Virginia's slaveocracy in putting slave maintenance ahead of common defense was not lost on militiamen of modest means. Since the beginning of the war, militiamen had complained that those with slaves were advantaged because they had captive laborers to work the fields at home while they served on the military field. The "poorer sort," petitioned Chesterfield County militiamen, "have not a slave to labour for them" when they were called out. In June 1781, even as Jefferson and the Virginia legislators were fleeing Charlottesville, the Rockbridge and Pittsylvania County militia petitioned that they were not in the position of slave owners and were unwilling to respond to the call to arms "in such a manner as would . . . totally ruin themselves, their wives and children." While principal slave owners ignored the recruiting laws or found ways to be invalidated off the militia rolls so they could flee for the hills in the face of the British advance, "poor men without a single slave, with a wife and many small children to maintain" were being reduced "to the most indigent circumstances and hard grinding want." Once again, in the hour of greatest need, Virginia's deep entrenchment in slavery proved a "touchstone for class divisions among white Virginians."<sup>71</sup>

### *Native American Agonies*

While the African American struggle for liberation reached a climax in the concluding years of war, Native Americans engaged in a desperate defense of their revolutionary goals. This was necessarily carried out in several frontier zones, because the expansionist campaigns of American frontiersmen were regional rather than national and were conducted variously by Continental army units, state militias, and even self-appointed local white marauders. In some of these encounters, Native Americans were split between conservative accommodationists trying to remain neutral or accede to American demands on their lands and radical militants determined to defend their ancient homelands and sure that bowing to white demands only sharpened the appetites of land-hungry farmers. On the American side, men of moderation tried to keep Indians neutral and attempted to restrain trigger-happy frontiersmen. Opposing them were Indian haters bent on genocidal policies and possession of Indian land.

In the northern sector, the Iroquois remained divided. The Mohawk,



Seneca, Cayuga, and many Onondaga radicals had already cast the die to defend their lands and political autonomy by allying with the British. But the conservative Oneidas and Tuscaroras kept faith with the Americans. Launching a new wave of frontier raids in spring 1779, the militant Iroquois meant to deprive the Americans of one of their richest wheat belts. Putting farmhouses, barns, gristmills, and sawmills to the torch was more important than killing their enemies. In the valleys of the Mohawk, Monongahela, and Delaware rivers, militia units were ineffective in stopping the Indian marauders. "Our Country is on the eve of breaking up," wrote one militia officer to Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council. "There is nothing to be seen but desolation, fire, and smoke, as the inhabitants [are] collected at particular places. The enemy burns all the houses that [the frontier families] have evacuated."<sup>72</sup>

By the summer of 1779, General Washington made regaining an upper hand over the Iroquois rather than the British his priority. As late as September 1778, he had concluded that "to defend an extensive frontier against the incursions of Indians and the banditti under Butler and Brant is next to impossible," but now state leaders in New York and Pennsylvania changed his mind. Committing one-third of his army, Washington made the destruction of the Iroquois "the main American military effort of the year." Four times in the summer of 1779, American forces carried the battle to the heart of Iroquoia. Washington's orders were explicit: to "lay waste all the settlements around . . . that the country may not be merely overrun but destroyed." The first attack was inexplicably on the villages of the mostly neutralist Onondaga. The torching of three Onondaga villages and the taking of thirty-three prisoners, including one of Joseph Brant's children, drove three hundred Onondaga warriors to the British side. Within weeks, they reduced the white frontier village of Cobleskill to ashes.<sup>73</sup>

Brant's Volunteers were in the thick of the summer campaigns. The American expeditionary forces under General John Sullivan, General James Clinton, and Colonel Daniel Brodhead, some 4,600 strong with 1,200 horses and 700 cattle, outmanned, outgunned, and out-provisioned Brant's Volunteers, Butler's Rangers, and about five hundred Iroquois warriors. Washington knew that Sullivan's expedition was unlikely to face regular British units, which were fully occupied along the coast. Nonetheless, anticipating intense battles with the Iroquois, Washington advised Sullivan and Clinton "to rush on with the war whoop and fixed bayonet" and "make rather than

receive attacks." But the expeditionary campaign saw only one pitched battle. At the Indian village at Newtown (near today's Elmira, New York) in late August the Iroquois-Tory contingent at first held its ground, only to be routed by the American forces. Heavily outnumbered and unable to defend their villages, Brant and his rangers avoided set battles, while the Iroquois villagers evacuated their homesites. Major Jeremiah Fogg recounted that "Not a single gun was fired for eighty miles on our march out or an Indian seen on our return." Brant's Volunteers contented themselves with pummeling the villages of the Oneida and Tuscarora allied with the Americans.<sup>74</sup>

In a largely uncontested scorched-earth campaign, matches and axes proved more important than guns. The American armies razed Indian villages, burned 160,000 bushels of corn, girdled thousands of fruit trees in ancient orchards, and took a limited number of prisoners. General Sullivan reported triumphantly to Congress that "the whole country [was] explored in search of Indian settlements, and I am well persuaded that, except one town situated near the Allegana [Allegheny] . . . there is not a single town left in the country of the Five Nations." Sullivan missed one other town in his account, but he was nearly right about destroying almost all Iroquois villages. Historian Page Smith calls it "the most ruthless application of a scorched-earth policy in American history," rivaled only by Sherman's Civil War march to the sea or the American search-and-destroy missions of the Vietnam War.<sup>75</sup> The ruthlessness reached an extreme when American soldiers plundered Indian graves to carry off the prized burial items customarily laid alongside deceased Iroquois. Other soldiers skinned bodies "from the hips down for bootlegs." An Onondaga chief testified that when Sullivan's troops attacked his town they "put to death all the women and children, excepting some of the young women, whom they carried away for the use of their soldiers and were afterwards put to death in a more shameful manner."<sup>76</sup>

The winter of 1779–80, which brought bitter cold and the deepest snow in recent years, was a time of dying, dysentery, and displacement for some three thousand Iroquois people, most of whom took refuge in the British fort at Niagara on the south shore of Lake Ontario. There the British fed and resupplied them. Sullivan had destroyed villages, granaries, and orchards, but not warriors; for all this devastation, he did not take the fight out of Brant and the other Iroquois. Americans had expected "overtures of peace" from the Iroquois, as New York's governor believed, but instead they got renewed warrior fury. "The nests are destroyed," recounted Major Fogg, "but the birds are



still on the wing." Fogg could not have been more right. "We do not look upon ourselves as defeated," one Iroquois chief assured the British, "for we have never fought." A Cayuga chief at Fort Niagara echoed the thought, promising that come spring they would avenge their losses: "If it is the will of the Great Spirit [that we] leave our bones with those of the rest of our brethren, rather than evacuate our country or give our enemy room to say we fled from them," they would fight to the end.<sup>77</sup>

True to this word, some one thousand Iroquois, fighting with five hundred Tory rangers, sought revenge the next spring. Sweeping out of Fort Niagara even before the spring thaws of 1780, war parties devastated American farmlands and villages in New York's Schoharie Valley. Through the summer they matched the destructiveness of Sullivan's army a year before. Nothing stood in their way, for after Sullivan, Clinton, and Brodhead's men returned in "rags and [with] emaciated bodies," Washington sent them south to counter Cornwallis's southern campaign. Only local militiamen—a dispirited, weakly equipped lot—were left to protect the New York–Pennsylvania frontier. By autumn 1780, hardly an American settlement west of Schenectady existed. The Iroquois destroyed at least 150,000 bushels of wheat, while farming families streamed eastward for protection.<sup>78</sup> In Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River valley, south of Mohawk country, and on the state's western frontier all the way to the forks of the three rivers that joined at Pittsburgh, the situation was much the same. It was as if an immense army of locusts dressed in American uniforms had devastated Iroquoia in the summer of 1779, to be followed by an army of locusts dressed in Indian garb and British uniforms that laid waste to the American frontier farmlands the following summer.

In the spring and summer of 1781, with the New York and Pennsylvania militias near collapse and Washington's Continental army fully engaged in North Carolina and Virginia, the Tory and Iroquois men commanded by Joseph Brant and Sir John Johnson, William Johnson's son, struck again. This time, the American resistance was stiffer. Rallied by Colonel Marinus Willett, a New York City merchant and former leader of the Sons of Liberty, eight hundred militiamen slowed down the Tory-Iroquois marauders. The vicious cycle of depredation and counterdepredation repeated itself, as the men of two agricultural societies tried to maim each other through crop destruction, village razing, and battles of attrition. By the time Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown on October 18, 1781, the frontier war in New York

and Pennsylvania had reached a stalemate; but there was little left to destroy on either side.

From 1779 to 1781, while frontier wars in Iroquoia and western New York and Pennsylvania devastated both Indian and American farming life, another contest of long duration reached a climax east of the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio River all the way to the Great Lakes. Here the War of Independence turned into a war of conquest. The precarious grip of the British in this vast territory, weaker than in New York and Pennsylvania, provided a stage onto which the young George Rogers Clark could stride to claim his place as one of the heroes of American storybooks.

When the minutemen at Concord and Lexington were skirmishing with the British, Clark was twenty-three years old and living restlessly on a farm not far from Jefferson's Monticello. Farming was far too dull for this strongly built man with flaming red hair. What he loved was the wilderness west of Charlottesville, and what he hated was the Indians who lived there—the Shawnee, Ottawas, Hurons, Potawatomis, Kickapoos, Winnebagos, Chippewas, Sauk, and Foxes. In the early 1770s, Clark had explored and surveyed lands drained by the Ohio River in what was to become Kentucky. In 1774 he became a militia captain in Dunmore's War. Thereafter, with a contingent of admiring men, he took up huge tracts of land along the Kentucky River. Full of ambition and martial ardor, he began scheming at conquering what would become known in American history as the Old Northwest. His short-term goal was to prevent a collapse of Governor Dunmore's 1774 treaty with the Shawnee, by which they pledged neutrality. With the British promising supplies to the tribes, Clark argued, Virginia's back door to the prized lands beyond the Cumberland Gap was in great danger. But his long-term goal was possession of the entire Northwest.<sup>79</sup>

Clark's plan of conquest did not materialize for almost two years. But on January 3, 1778, he got what he wanted from Virginia's legislature and Governor Patrick Henry: logistical support and a colonel's commission to raise seven companies of militiamen. The intermediate targets of this incursion were the small British forts at Kaskaskia and Vincennes, in today's Illinois and Indiana. Both were surrounded with small gatherings of French-speaking farmers who had been incorporated into the British orbit after 1763. The ultimate target was the British stronghold at Detroit—the key to controlling the vast North American heartland. If the Americans could take these three garrisons, they could lay claim to a territory as large as the thirteen colonies.



Clark's official charge was to defend the small settlements of Virginians in Kentucky; his secret orders were to accomplish the mission he laid before his promoters—storm Kaskaskia, Vincennes, and Detroit, thereby wresting an empire from the native peoples and their British allies. Clark found recruiting tough going, almost as difficult as for the recruiting sergeants in Virginia's tidewater counties. How could he get volunteers, he pondered, "to be taken near a thousand [miles] from the body of their country to attack a people five times their number, and merciless tribes of Indians . . . , determined enemies to us?" Clark's zealotry produced not more than two hundred men, and some of them deserted as soon as they heard the details of what they believed to be a suicidal adventure. But on June 26, 1778, Clark and his contingent on the Ohio River headed downstream for hundreds of miles to the junction of the Tennessee River. From there they marched 120 miles northwest.

On July 5, Clark captured Kaskaskia without firing a shot. The word of the French alliance with the Americans made easier Clark's job of winning over the farming French *habitants* and their allied Illinois native peoples. Now, Vincennes, 150 miles to the east, was next. Sending Kaskaskia's French priest and doctor to Vincennes to announce that Kaskaskia had pledged allegiance to the "Republic of Virginia," Clark also took Vincennes without a fight.

Clark's ultimate objective, Detroit, was a harder matter. But he did not have to make the six-hundred-mile expedition to Detroit to reach his prized objective. Rather, Detroit came to him. The British garrison's commanding officer, Lieutenant Governor Henry Hamilton (also the governor of Canada), started south on October 7, 1778, to expel Clark from the trans-Appalachian country. Starting with 175 soldiers (many of them Frenchmen who had joined the British army) and 60 Shawnee warriors, Hamilton gathered other Indian warriors along the way. On December 17, after an incredible seventy-one-day march, Hamilton's force of five hundred retook Vincennes, where the French militiamen refused to fight and only a handful of Virginia militiamen remained since Clark had withdrawn most of them to Kaskaskia.

Nearly a thousand miles west of the main scene of the War for Independence, Clark gambled and won. The enlistment terms of many of his men had expired, and he was down to about one hundred wilderness-toughened soldiers. But Clark, bolstered by one hundred French recruits, decided to march on Vincennes in February 1779, through miles of heavy snow and

boggy terrain saturated by an early spring thaw. Clark knew his attack was risky, but he was hardly a fainthearted man. To his good fortune, most of Hamilton's Shawnee auxiliaries had gone back to their villages and the French *habitants* in the town of Vincennes were ill-disposed to fight alongside the British since they had earlier pledged allegiance to the Americans. After marching for eighteen days over 150 miles through atrocious conditions, Clark invested the town and surrounded the fort at Vincennes. Clark then called for Hamilton's surrender on honorable terms. When Hamilton tarried, Clark and his men pushed five Indians they had just captured into clear view of the fort. There they tomahawked four of the five. One of them, a young Ottawa chief, wrenched the tomahawk from his skull and mockingly handed it back to his executioner before collapsing in a torrent of blood. Clark spared the fifth, the eighteen-year-old son of Chief Pontiac, when one of his captains pleaded that Pontiac, some years before, had saved his life. Hamilton capitulated with seventy-nine men on February 24; on the next day he surrendered the fort.

The execution of the four Indians, with the terms of surrender under negotiation, became two different stories told by Clark and Hamilton after the war. Victors' stories become enshrined in a nation's mythology and end up in history books; losers' stories are suppressed or forgotten. In his expedition journal, first published in 1791, Clark passed over the execution of the four captured Indian warriors with the briefest mention, though he had described the grisly incident fully in a letter to George Mason at the time. Hamilton's journal, which remained unpublished until 1951, featured the butchery. "One . . . was tomahawked either by Clark or one of his officers," Hamilton had noted ironically in his journal, "the other three, foreseeing their fate, began to sing their death song and were butchered in succession, though at the very time a flag of truce was hanging out at the fort and the firing had ceased on both sides. . . . The blood of the victims was still visible for days afterwards, a testimony of the courage and humanity of Colonel Clark." Hamilton further described how Clark met him directly after the executions with "his hands and face still reeking from the human sacrifice in which he had acted as chief priest" and "told me with great exultation how he had been employed." Clark then promised Hamilton that "for his part, he would never spare man, woman, or child of them on whom he could lay his hands." It was a genocidal promise kept many times in the last stages of the war.<sup>80</sup>

Clark dreamed of capping his heroics at Vincennes with the capture of



Detroit. Neither Virginia nor the Continental Congress would give him the men, supplies, and money for a new expedition. But he remained in the so-called Western Department, hoping to fight against a British regiment in Detroit reconstituted with Indian auxiliaries. After Hamilton's contingent made a daring assault on the American settlements in Kentucky in 1780 and took 350 prisoners, Clark made another of his famous marches through rough terrain—480 miles in thirty-one days—to descend on the Shawnee in August 1780. Rather than seeing the "Big Knives" raze their home village at Chillicothe, the Shawnees burned it themselves. They then fought hard at Piqua, another of their villages, located on the Mad River. Clark's artillery pieces provided the crucial advantage in the American victory. After the Shawnees fled, Clark's men burned cornfields and gathered whatever booty they could find, including unearthed burial objects. Even the scalps of disinterred Shawnees became part of the plunder. One of Clark's trophies was Joseph Rogers, his cousin. A prisoner of the Shawnee for two years, Rogers had adopted Indian customs and fought alongside the Shawnee against the Kentuckians at Piqua. Clark watched his cousin die of a battle wound after Rogers fell into the hands of his Kentucky contingent.

As much as he craved a fight with the British at Detroit in 1781, Clark was never able to raise enough money or men for the assault. Instead he tangled with Joseph Brant. Two charismatic leaders propelled to leadership roles by the incessant irregular warfare in the trans-Appalachian region, they met in the summer of 1781. Brant had reached Detroit by foot and sail that spring and for the next three months helped rally Huron, Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Miami warriors to head off the rumored Clark attack on Detroit. Moving south, Brant watched Clark and his men pass by to fortify forts that protected the Kentuckians from British-Indian attacks. Then Brant sprang his trap, ambushing one hundred Pennsylvania militiamen near the junction of the Little Miami and Ohio rivers as the Pennsylvanians moved to join Clark. The annihilation left forty-one Americans dead and all the others captured—the worst defeat in the *pays d'en haut* suffered by the Americans.<sup>81</sup> This ended Clark's dream of taking Detroit.

Brant spent the winter of 1781–82 in Detroit, and it was probably here where he heard the news of Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown. But that did not end the war in the Illinois country. Brant's hammer blow deprived Clark of a crack unit that might have enabled him to march on Detroit, but given the condition of his Virginia and Kentucky volunteers, this may not have

been possible anyway. One of Clark's captains described "the wretched situation of the few troops remaining westward. Many of them have been in service for two years past and never received a shoe, stocking, or hat and none of them any pay." They were probably no better off than the troops of the Western Department that General William Irvine described in spring 1782: "I never saw troops cut so truly a deplorable and at the same time despicable a figure. No man would believe from their appearance that they were soldiers; nay, it would be difficult to determine whether they were *white men*."<sup>82</sup> It was no wonder, then, that through 1780–82, the thin line of Americans in the border area, suffering desertions, grew thinner.

Hundreds of miles south of the Kentucky-Illinois country, another chapter of the conflict of expansion unfolded in the last years of the war. The ability of the Cherokee and other southern Indian nations to protect themselves depended on a continuing flow of weapons, ammunition, and trade goods from the British. That flow of goods hinged, in turn, on British control of ports of entry—on the Atlantic coast at Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina; and on the Gulf of Mexico coast at Pensacola, Florida, and Mobile, Alabama. The military strength of the warrior nations was formidable on paper: about 6,000 Creek, 7,000 Choctaw, 3,000 Cherokee, and 750 Chickasaw. But the warriors were only as good as the British supplies reaching them. Equally important, they were internally divided, particularly the Cherokee. In addition, they never fought as a united, intertribal Indian force.

For both the militant and accommodationist Cherokees, this became agonizingly evident. It will be remembered from chapter 5 that the Cherokees led by the older chiefs remained in their much devastated ancient towns in the hill country of the Carolinas, where they pledged to fight the Americans no more, while the Cherokee irreconcilables led by Dragging Canoe had built new villages on the Chickamauga River in today's Tennessee. From there, the militants cheered the British capture of Augusta and Savannah, Georgia, in 1778–79 because this opened up a new supply line along the Savannah River for the British to furnish them trade goods. Dragging Canoe's warriors operated with the British to seize control of parts of the Georgia and South Carolina interior. This was enough for Virginia to launch a punishing expedition against the irreconcilable Cherokees in April 1779. Though the Virginians destroyed eleven towns and most of their food supplies, the defiant Cherokee "are not yet conquered," Dragging Canoe told a Shawnee delegation in July 1779. As Cornwallis swept north out of South Carolina in 1780,



the militant Chickamauga Cherokee went on the warpath again. This led Governor Thomas Jefferson in June 1780 to call up 250 militiamen to prosecute another attack. Jefferson explicitly charged the officers of the Washington and Montgomery County militia units to take "great care that no injury be done to the friendly part of the [Cherokee] nation," and expressed his confidence that no Carolinians, who were to join the Virginians, "would propose to confound together the friendly and hostile parts of the Cherokee nations." The friendly Cherokees "have our faith pledged for their protection," he reminded the units taking the field.<sup>83</sup>

But Indian hating led to the destruction of the accommodationist Cherokees rather than the militants who had followed Dragging Canoe to the Chickamauga. Colonel Arthur Campbell led the Virginia militiamen, while the hotheaded John Sevier, one of the first North Carolinians to follow the path blazed by Daniel Boone into the Holston River valley on the eve of the Revolution, led a North Carolina contingent. The little army of about seven hundred marched toward the Chickamauga towns in December 1780. But they stopped fifty miles short, with the men apparently queasy about taking on the fiercely irreconcilable young Cherokee warriors. Closer at hand was far easier quarry—the friendly, less combative Cherokees.

Charging that the neutralist Cherokee were foxes in sheep's clothing, secretly plotting with the British, Sevier and Campbell fell on seventeen neutral Cherokee towns, where they burned a thousand houses, storehouses, and lodges and destroyed 50,000 bushels of corn. The work was easy because most of the Cherokee fled their homes, trying to avoid the Americans. In a detailed letter, Colonel Campbell told Jefferson about how his men saw the Cherokees "in force stretching along the hills" but how they "quietly let us pass on in order without firing a gun."<sup>84</sup> Immediately, the Virginians marched into Chota, the Cherokee's "beloved town," where they killed thirteen men who offered no resistance. Desperately trying to stop the killing, Cherokee ceremonial chief Nancy Ward reached Campbell to make an overture for peace. The niece of Attakullakulla, Ward was well known to the Virginians and Carolinians for warning frontiersmen on the Watauga River five years earlier of Dragging Canoe's imminent attack. But Campbell "evaded" the overture in order to complete the destruction of the Cherokee towns. "No place in the Overhill country remained unvisited," Sevier reported with satisfaction.<sup>85</sup> It was the southern equivalent of Sullivan's scorched-earth expedition of 1778 in Iroquois country, except that in this case the devastated region was that of



*Nancy Ward went down in the annals of American history as the "good Indian," because she counseled accommodation with the American frontiersmen and saved many of them by warning of imminent Cherokee attacks. Here she is shown with a plaque inscribed "Watauga 1776" to commemorate her aid to the Tennessee frontiersmen. Nearby, in Benton, Tennessee, the Nancy Ward chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution maintains her burial place. Visitors get an encapsulated mythology from a tablet that calls her "Princess and Prophetess of the Cherokee Nation. The Pocahontas of Tennessee, the Constant Friend of the American Pioneer."\**

the friendly Cherokee. For the militant Cherokees in the towns established under Dragging Canoe's leadership, this was confirmation of the treachery of the Americans.

While razing Chota, Campbell's militiamen found what historians have

\*Carolyn Thomas Foreman, *Indian Women Chiefs* (Washington, D.C.: Zenger Publishing Co., 1976), 82.



called the archives of the Cherokee nation—treaties, letters, and commissions. Among them was the smoking gun proving the duplicity of the accommodationist Cherokee, or so say many historians. But the evidence is based on Colonel Arthur Campbell's statement to Jefferson that he found documents in Chota "expressive of their hostile designs on us." Yet Campbell gave no details about the "hostile designs," the documents have never been found, and there is no mention of them in the extensive papers of Thomas Jefferson. Against this shaky evidence are the facts that only one Indian village offered resistance of any kind, and only one man in the American strike force of seven hundred was injured or killed by the Cherokees. For their part, the militiamen killed twenty-nine men and took seventeen prisoners.

The entry of the Spanish into the war on the American side in mid-1779 began to turn the tide against the southernmost Indian nations. British-controlled Mobile fell to a Spanish fleet in February 1780. Only the presence of some two thousand Creek and Choctaw gunmen at Pensacola kept the Spanish from capturing that key British port in the same year. But the Spanish fleet, with seven thousand men, returned in April 1781 and took the port after a month-long siege. Augusta, Georgia, fell to the Americans a month later. These British losses of the pivotal port cities "marked the end of effective functioning of the [English] Southern Indian Department."<sup>86</sup> And with the departing British troops went British traders and supplies for their Indian allies.

The collapse of the British-Indian war effort in 1781 put the Americans in the position to secure a long-term peace with the still populous southern tribes. But complicating this desire—in fact nullifying it—was the hunger for national expansion that had burgeoned over the previous six years. When they were not fighting, southern frontiersmen had conducted what historian Colin Calloway calls "a squatters' invasion of the upper Tennessee country." William Fleming, a frontier leader, acknowledged as much to Jefferson in February 1781: "[T]he burning of their huts and destruction of their corn, will I fear make the whole [Cherokee] Nation our irreconcilable Enemies, and force them for sustenances to live altogether by depredation on our frontiers or make an open junction with our foes, as the loss they have sustained in men is little or nothing."<sup>87</sup> A month later, with the battered Cherokee accommodationists still suing for peace, North Carolina's John Sevier returned with 180 horsemen to destroy fifteen other Cherokee towns from which the Indi-

ans had fled in panic. This unprovoked assault brought a sharp rebuke from Colonel William Christian, who had commanded the expedition against the Cherokee in 1776: "People of all ranks appear to have a desire to encroach upon Indian lands; this will throw great obstacles in the way of a treaty. . . . The only inducements the Indians can have for treating are for us to do them justice respecting their land and to subsist their families this summer."<sup>88</sup> But the victors were in no way ready to be magnanimous.

### *Radical Mutineers*

As George Rogers Clark was etching his place in history in the trans-Appalachian wilderness and Virginia and North Carolina militiamen were razing friendly Cherokee towns, Joseph Plumb Martin, a long-term enlistee in Washington's Continental army, was reaching the limit of his endurance. Looking back on the Revolution, Martin remembered how his unit of the Connecticut Line, after a cruel subzero winter and what he called "the monster hunger still attending us," nearly mutinied in May 1780. For five months they had received no pay and their meager meat rations had just been halved. "The men were exasperated beyond endurance," remembered Private Martin. "They could not stand it any longer; they saw no other alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up, and go home. . . . Here was the army starved and naked, and there their country sitting still and expecting the army to do notable things while fainting from sheer starvation."<sup>89</sup>

Martin recounted years after the war how his regiment joined with others of the Connecticut Line to rise up against their officers. One officer, Colonel Jonathan Meigs, was bayoneted in a scuffle with an enlisted man. But in the end, the men desisted. "We therefore still kept upon our parade in groups, venting our spleen at our country and government, then at our officers, and then at ourselves for our imbecility in staying there and starving in detail for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us, so they could enjoy themselves while we were keeping a cruel enemy from them."<sup>90</sup>

Two months later, in July 1780, one of their officers, Lieutenant Ebenezer Huntington, almost invited the men to mutiny. Writing to his brother, the twenty-six-year-old Yale graduate described how "the insults and neglects which the army have met with beggars all description. . . . They can endure it no longer. I am in rags, have lain in the rain on the ground for 40 hours past,



and only a junk of fresh beef and that without salt to dine on this day. . . . I despise my countrymen. I wish I could say I was not born in America. I once gloried in it but am now ashamed of it."<sup>91</sup>

Washington himself was near his wit's end in 1780. The provisioning system had nearly broken down, the desertion rate had skyrocketed, and morale was at an all-time low. "It would be well for the troops," he wrote Robert Morris in December 1780, "if like chameleons, they could live upon air, or, like the bear, suck their paws for sustenance during the rigor of the approaching season."<sup>92</sup> Officers had their hands full quelling repeated rumblings of mutiny, but were utterly incapable of dealing with the causes of it.

In January 1781, with the supply system crumbling and Continental paper dollars—which served as pay for the army—plummeting in value, a large-scale mutiny finally broke out. This time it was the Pennsylvania Line, quickly followed by the New Jersey Line. In this double mutiny we can see in capsule form all of the difficulties of managing a war that only about a quarter of the nation's peoples supported ideologically and an even smaller number supported materially. The way the mutineers conducted and expressed themselves also tells us how they exemplified the democratic values of revolutionary radicals. Insubordination and direct defiance of officers' authority is the most radical action any man under arms can take. In the army rule book, no mutiny is justifiable, and the penalty for it is immediate trial, sentencing, and execution. However, the Pennsylvania and New Jersey enlisted men revolted against their officers in the name of some of the most basic goals of the American Revolution—social justice, equality, and fair play. It says volumes that most of the mutineers' officers, even Washington himself, believed the men rose up with justification.

The mutiny of January 1781 came as no surprise. As early as November 1775, a company of Pennsylvania riflemen had mutinied in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and soon thereafter Washington lost a significant part of his army through massive desertions. Harsh new "Articles of War" passed by Congress the next year increased the number of capital offenses and specifically made desertion punishable by death, but even this did little to stop desertion and mutiny. For the entire course of the war, deserters in huge numbers dropped behind and disappeared during the interminable route marches. "By midwar," writes military historian Charles Patrick Neimeyer, "mutiny, actual or threatened . . . , became commonplace in the Continental army."<sup>93</sup>

Storm signals went up one after another. In the year before the major

mutiny of January 1781, three smaller mutinies erupted. The first came at West Point on January 1, 1780, when the Massachusetts Line revolted in the middle of the most severe winter since 1740–41. In May, two regiments of the Connecticut Line, disgusted with no pay for five months and short rations for several weeks, turned out and prepared to march away in defiance of their officers. The officers restored order and pragmatically exercised lenity against the leaders. But this did little to improve the mood and morale of the soldiers. A month later, thirty-one men of New York's First Regiment deserted at Fort Schuyler, apparently to join the British. One of their officers pursued them with Oneida auxiliaries, who overtook the men and shot thirteen of them dead.

For the Pennsylvania Line, the causes of such mutinies—no pay and scarce food and clothing—were all too familiar. Just a month before the January 1781 mutiny, Brigadier General Anthony Wayne warned Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council of the desperate condition of his troops, who were quartered for the winter at Morristown in northern New Jersey. Dry bread, a bit of meat, worn-out coats, and tattered blankets, each shared by three soldiers, "is but wretched living and shelter against the winter's piercing cold, drifting snow, and chilling sleets." He might have added that with their pay in arrears by a year, many of the married men were staggering to cope with an especially cruel situation. "Our soldiery are not devoid of reasoning faculties," wrote Wayne. "They have now served their country for near five years, poorly clothed, badly fed, and worse paid. . . . They have not seen a paper dollar in the way of pay for near twelve months."<sup>94</sup> If his 2,473 men were not paid, fed, clothed, and assured that the enlistment bounty of one hundred acres of land would actually be given, they would desert, as they had been doing in massive numbers over the previous year. Beyond desertion beckoned mutiny.

This was a situation that the Continental Congress had wrestled with from the outset, beginning with the inability of the states to meet the supply quotas for uniforms, boots, food, tents and blankets, and arms and ammunition set to conduct the war. For men in the field, it was unfathomable that they starved in a country of agricultural plenty and were "bare footed, bare legged, bare breeched," as one Massachusetts officer expressed it.<sup>95</sup> When they could bear it no more, they took the desperate chance that mutiny might bring the Congress to its senses or bring the people in the states to understand that the war could not be continued with a starving, unpaid, unclothed army.



North Carolina's legislature, just a year before the Pennsylvania Line's mutiny, heard a pathetic tale from the widow of one soldier executed for leading a mutiny in the North Carolina Line. Ann Glover could not bring her husband back, but she reasoned that the state owed her support for her small children and should offer his pay, which was fifteen months in arrears. "The poor soldiers" were "possessed of the same attachment and affection to their families as those in command," she wrote. "[I] ask you what must the feeling of the man be who fought at Brandywine, at Germantown, and at Stony Point and did his duty, and when on another march in defense of his country, with poverty staring him full in the face, he was denied his pay?" The *Connecticut Courant* echoed the thought: "How is it that the poor soldier's wives in many of our towns go from door to door, begging a supply of the necessaries of life at the stipulated prices, and are turned away, notwithstanding the solemn agreements of the towns to supply such?"<sup>96</sup>

The largest mutiny of the war erupted on January 1, 1781, a day of special significance. This was the day on which the three-year enlistments of many men in the Pennsylvania Line expired, or at least that was their understanding of their contracts. Many wished to put three miserable years behind them, but most were willing to reenlist under the new bounties offered since the previous July—about twenty-seven dollars in hard money and certificates for two hundred acres of land after the war. But their officers told them that Congress meant their enlistment extended for the duration of the war, whether that be three, five, or seven years. This enraged the men, who insisted that they had enlisted for three years *or* the duration of the war, meaning whichever came first.

About ten o'clock P.M. on January 1, the men revolted. Returning from an officers' elegant regimental dinner, their leaders found men pouring from their huts brandishing their arms, cheering loudly, and gathering on the parade ground. One captain trying to control his unit was shot mortally. Seizing the artillery pieces, loading them with grapeshot, and breaking open the magazine filled with powder and balls, the men took control of the encampment. They rejected General Wayne's attempt to address them, telling him they intended to march to Philadelphia, where they would meet face-to-face with the congressmen "to see themselves righted" by those who had wronged them.

The ensuing melee left one officer dead, two others shot, and many others suffering wounds inflicted by musket butts, bayonets, and stones. At four-thirty in the morning, Wayne frantically scribbled a letter to Washington. "It

is with inexpressible pain that I now inform your Excellency of the general mutiny and defection which suddenly took place in the Pennsylvania Line . . . last evening. Every possible exertion was made by the officers to suppress it in its rise, but the torrent was too potent to be stemmed."<sup>97</sup> By noon the next day, almost all enlisted men had joined the mutineers. Falling in order under their elected sergeants, they marched southward out of camp. Nearly one-fourth of Washington's Continental army was now in full revolt.

Wayne's main concern was that the men would join the British, who were only two days' march to the east in New Jersey. Receiving word of the mutiny, the British sent promises to give the mutineers their back pay in hard money and the choice of serving with the British or going their own way. The mutineers assured Wayne they had no intention of defecting to the enemy; they were stalwart patriots to the core but had been badly served and would bear ill treatment no longer. "If that is your sentiments," Wayne answered, "I'll not leave you, and if you won't allow me to march in your front, I'll follow in your rear."<sup>98</sup> And so the march began. According to one witness, the men marched "in the most perfect order and seemed as if under military discipline." After electing a "board of sergeants," almost the entire army trudged south, marching by their own rules and imposing their own discipline. Within two days the mutineers had reached Princeton. Controlling the town, they appropriated Nassau Hall, the College of New Jersey's single building, which the board of sergeants used as a meeting place.

What kind of men were these mutineers? To judge by the Eleventh Regiment, led by Lieutenant Colonel Adam Hubley, they were mostly young, poor, and foreign-born. The majority of the Eleventh's twenty-five sergeants and twenty-two corporals were immigrants—ten born in England, nine in Ireland, three in Scotland, sixteen in unspecified countries, and only nine in the colonies. Of those in the rank and file whose birthplaces were recorded in the muster lists, eighty-seven came from Ireland, thirty-seven from England, eight from Germany, six from Scotland, and fifty-six from the American colonies. The occupations of two companies recorded on the muster lists show a heavy proportion of ordinary workers (laborers, farmers, weavers, shoemakers, tailors, soap boilers, and coopers), and a sprinkling of higher tradesmen (saddlers, carpenters, blacksmiths, watchmakers, tobacconists, and silversmiths).<sup>99</sup>

The men had tasted fire under severe conditions. They had fought under Anthony Wayne at the Battle of Monmouth (New Jersey) in suffocating heat



in June 1778, where they performed ably in the fiercest part of the fight, though they were "almost starving," as Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide-de-camp, reported. Months later, they stormed the British stronghold at Stony Point at midnight on July 15, 1779. In September 1780, hundreds of them marched sixteen miles in an astounding four hours to secure West Point as Benedict Arnold, defecting to the British, tried to deliver the stronghold to the enemy. These grizzled, battle-hardened men, accustomed to rigorous discipline, seemed to Private Joseph Martin like an army of gypsies. Martin described the baggage train of Continental army units as they passed down the west side of the Hudson River six months before the mutiny. "When that of the middle states passed us," he remembered, "it was truly amusing to see the number and habiliments of those attending it; of all specimens of human beings, this group capped the whole. A caravan of wild beasts could bear no comparison with it. There was 'Tag, Rag and Bobtail'; 'some in rags and some in jags,' but none 'in velvet gowns.' Some with two eyes, some with one, and some I believe with none at all. They 'beggared all description'; their dialect too was as confused as their bodily appearance was odd and disgusting. There was the Irish and Scotch brogue, murdered English, flat insipid Dutch, and some lingoes which would puzzle a philosopher to tell whether they belong to this world or some 'undiscovered country.'"<sup>100</sup> Martin was right about the awful condition of their uniforms and the babel of tongues, but he was wrong in what he implied about the men's mettle.

Handed General Wayne's anguished notice of the mutiny, Washington pondered his options. He discarded the idea of calling up the New Jersey militia to stop the Pennsylvanians, because the New Jersey Line was itself unreliable and in any event the militia was too small to overawe the mutineers. Washington also rejected the idea that Congress flee Philadelphia before the mutineers arrived, because this sign of weakness might encourage the angry soldiers to vent their spleen "upon the persons and properties of the citizens" (by which Washington meant the many wealthy Philadelphians whom soldiers saw as wan supporters of the American cause). With no good options, Washington directed Wayne to listen to the mutineers' grievances and promise careful consideration of their complaints. The commander in chief could hardly have done otherwise because he in fact agreed with their grievances. Indeed, so often had Washington unsuccessfully implored Congress to support his troops that he took some grim satisfaction in the revolt. "The circum-

stances will now point out more forcibly what ought to be done," he wrote Congress, "than anything that can possibly be said by me on the subject."<sup>101</sup>

Meanwhile, the alarmed Continental Congress agreed to coordinate with Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council to dissuade the mutineers from pressing on to Philadelphia. A joint committee, escorted by light horsemen from Philadelphia, reached Trenton on January 6 to meet with the mutineers' board of sergeants. Joseph Reed, president of Pennsylvania's executive council, and General Wayne began the negotiations at Princeton the next day. For the first time in the American Revolution, noncommissioned officers of Washington's army parleyed the terms of the soldiers' enlistment directly with their commanding general and the head of the nation's most populous state.

Both sides put proposals on the table. Then Reed and Wayne listened to accounts of how the soldiers had been enlisted with dishonest promises and practices. After hurried discussions, Reed and Wayne agreed to the men's main demands: that they would be given total amnesty and not be considered traitors for their mutiny, and that no man would be held to service beyond what he had voluntarily agreed to. Disputed terms of enlistment would be put before a commission, and the soldier's oath on his understanding of the terms would be accepted in the absence of official enlistment papers. Those leaving the service would receive back pay, adjusted for inflation; the wretched condition of the soldiers' clothing would be remedied as soon as possible. General John Sullivan, part of the congressional negotiating committee, wrote to Chevalier Anne-César de La Luzerne, French minister to the United States, that "Perhaps history does not furnish an instance of so large a body of troops revolting from the command of their officers, marching in such exact order, without doing the least injury to individuals, and remaining in this situation for such a length of time, without division or confusion among themselves, and then returning to their duty as soon as their reasonable demands were complied with." Sullivan was almost ready to pin medals on the mutineers, who had "no officer to command them and no force to prevent their joining the enemy for which they had repeated invitations; yet, though they well knew they were liable to the severest punishment for their revolt, they disdained the British officers with a firmness that would have done honor to the ancient Romans."<sup>102</sup>

Finding enlistment papers proved cumbersome and often impossible; in



the absence of the papers, the word of the individual enlisted man was accepted. By the end of January, about 1,250 of the 2,473 men took discharges. The other half were furloughed until March 15, when they were told to rendezvous at various locations after a reorganization of the troubled Pennsylvania Line.

Even as hundreds of Pennsylvania soldiers were heading home—with pockets empty of real wages but holding certificates that promised back pay and land bounties—the New Jersey Line mutinied. The five hundred men in winter quarters at Pompton, New Jersey, had the same grievances as the Pennsylvania Line, and they were spirited up by news of the January 1 mutiny. On January 20, about two hundred of them revolted. Washington and Congress took a hard line, fearful of losing the entire army and knowing they could quell a small rebellion. Dispatching units of New Englanders from West Point under the command of Major General Robert Howe, Washington demanded unconditional surrender and ordered the positioning of cannons to maim the mutineers in their huts if they persisted, and the instant execution of “[a] few of the most active and incendiary leaders.” Howe picked one mutinous leader from each regiment and detailed six others to form a firing squad. Kneeling in the snow a short distance from the first mutineer to be executed, all six members of the firing squad deliberately missed their target. A second squad finished the job.<sup>103</sup> The Connecticut physician serving with the New Jersey Line recorded in his journal that “This was a most painful task; being themselves guilty, they were greatly distressed with the duty imposed upon them, and when ordered to load some of them shed tears.”<sup>104</sup> Two of the three singled out for execution fell before the firing squad; Howe pardoned the third mutineer at the last moment.

Four months later, after being on furlough, eight hundred men of the Pennsylvania Line reported for duty to York, Pennsylvania, and readied themselves for a march south to join General Lafayette for a showdown with Cornwallis’s army. But they would not march until General Wayne suppressed a small-scale mutiny. This time the grievance was over the value of state-issued paper money. Because it was worth about one-seventh of hard money and losing its value day by day, enlisted men regarded it as so much wallpaper. But this time, freshly uniformed and well-fed, most men did not join the disaffected. Wayne moved quickly to cure the “distemper” with “a liberal dose of nitre.” He clapped six mutineers into irons, conducted an instant drumhead trial, and detailed a firing squad to execute four of them. The

wife of one of the four, Macaroney Jack, ran to her husband to embrace him for the last time, only to be “felled . . . to the ground” by a tremendous sword blow from one of the attending officers. A volley of musket fire from a distance of ten feet blew the heads off the four mutineers in “a most painful scene.” The next day the Pennsylvania Line marched south to demonstrate, as the flamboyant Wayne put it, that his men “shall produce a conviction that death has no terrors when put in competition with our duty and glory.” At the siege of Yorktown, Wayne’s men proved him right. Lieutenant Colonel Henry (“Light Horse Harry”) Lee called Wayne’s soldiers “bold and daring,” men who “would always prefer an appeal to the bayonet to a toilsome march.”<sup>105</sup>

But toilsome marching was not yet over, nor was the matter of back pay, as we will see in the next chapter. For now, the mistreated Pennsylvania Line, mostly composed of young immigrant men, had served their nation and made their point. They hadn’t the slightest doubt about which side they were on or where they wanted to live out their lives. But they still had a vision of the country they wanted to hand down to their children. That vision would be challenged at the end of the war and in the following years by those who thought the Revolution had gone much too far in putting power in the hands of ordinary people.