

The Virginia Patriots and the Fort Gower Resolves

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Remarks made at the Virginia Luncheon, 121st DAR National Congress

Thursday 28 June 2012

National Press Club, Washington, DC

Six days from now I will celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the ceremony that made me an American. On the Fourth of July of 1972 at the Federal Courthouse in Roanoke I raised my right hand and took the oath of citizenship.

I moved to Southwest Virginia in 1969, so I have been a western Virginian for 43 years.

It is a deep honor, a matter of profound personal pride, and a very special celebration for me to be here today to speak to the Virginia patriots assembled at the 121st Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Today, I will speak about notable events — about the patriots and riflemen of western Virginia and what they did at a meeting they held at Fort Gower beside the Ohio River on the fifth of November in 1774.

These patriots were the officers of the army of the final Royal Governor of Virginia, whose name was Lord Dunmore. The Governor, his army, and these officers, had just returned from a successful campaign against the Shawnee Indians in what is today central Ohio.

The last vestige of British authority over Virginia soil was eliminated twenty months later, in July of 1776, when this Governor Dunmore was driven from Virginia forever. The men who drove him were led by Andrew Lewis — one of these Fort Gower officers.

As Dunmore departed, Patrick Henry was installed as the first native-born Governor of Virginia.

The place where the patriot officers met in November 1774 was a rough, log building that they had hastily erected only a few weeks earlier as a base camp to support their military operations. The Governor had named their base camp Fort Gower and I have written that Fort Gower is a "Forgotten Shrine of Virginia History."

It is a delicious irony of history that the English politician, Lord Gower, for whom the fort was named, was a particularly aggressive supporter of parliament's Intolerable Acts, the series of British legislative actions that became a principal spur for American resentment and resistance.

The officers and men who adopted the Fort Gower Resolves carried muzzle-loading Kentucky long rifles. In addition to the stirring Resolves they made, it was their extreme self-confidence and their effectiveness with their rifles that greatly impressed and influenced the eastern Virginia leaders.

The principal engagement fought by Lord Dunmore's army was the Battle of Point Pleasant. It took place on the tenth of October 1774. It was fought between the militia men of western Virginia and Indians of the Shawnee and Mingo tribes.

Point Pleasant is at the eastern point of land where the northerly flowing New or Kanawha River joins the Ohio River. The battle field is in present-day Mason County, West Virginia. Point Pleasant is about 30 miles downstream down the Ohio River from Fort Gower.

Today, the site of the Battle of Point Pleasant is a handsome State Park — marked by an 84-foot tall granite obelisk. On all four sides of the base of that obelisk are mounted fine bronze plates. On those plates are listed the names and the ranks of the Virginia militia men who fought there. The men came principally from the counties of Augusta, Botetourt, and Fincastle, with smaller contingents from Bedford and Culpeper Counties and other scattered places.

The Battle of Point Pleasant was a great victory for the Virginians but it was dearly bought. Many of the approximately one-thousand Virginia militia men who were engaged survived the battle unharmed. But more than a hundred were wounded and eighty-one died.

In front of the south side of the obelisk stands a twelve foot high stone statue of a Virginia militiaman. He is a typical western Virginia frontiersman. He wears a characteristic, fringed, open-fronted hunting shirt belted around his waist. In his left hand he holds a Kentucky long rifle, with its barrel before his chest and its butt resting on the ground at his feet. His powder horn and bullet bag hang across his body from his left shoulder.

In the waning months of 1774 and the opening months of 1775 the rifle and the hunting shirt became powerful symbols of Virginia Patriotism.

The Kentucky Rifle was an American invention developed for American needs. Derived from a combination of elements from German hunting guns and English fowling pieces it was honed by Pennsylvania gunsmiths to meet the needs of Virginia frontier rangers and long-hunters. The key requirements of those rangers were for a firearm with light weight and good balance, deadly accuracy, economical use of powder and shot, and ease of maintenance far from civilization.

At the time the Revolution began, few Americans other than the frontiersmen even knew of the existence of rifles. In June of 1775 our second president John Adams — in a letter to his wife — remarked that he had only "recently heard" about this "peculiar kind of musket, called a rifle."

The men who made the Fort Gower resolves carried rifles.

Today, there is no trace of the site where Fort Gower once stood. No one would know that the tiny village of Hockingport is a shrine save for a single stone marker bearing a bronze plaque with the inscription that begins: "HERE WAS EXPRESSED THE SPIRIT OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE ON NOVEMBER 5, 1774." After describing the events, at the bottom of the plaque it states "ERECTED BY THE DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, NOVEMBER 5, 1923." I say thank you Daughters for marking this shrine.

The events of November the fifth of 1774 at Fort Gower were bracketed by two important events significant to all American patriots. The Fort Gower Resolves were preceded by the meeting of the very First Continental Congress held at Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia from September fifth to October twenty-sixth 1774. The Fort Gower Resolves were followed, four months later, on March the twenty-third 1775, by Patrick Henry's riveting give-me-liberty-or-give-me-death speech delivered at the Second Virginia Convention at St. John's Church in Richmond.

Less than four weeks after Patrick Henry spoke, gunfire at the old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts, marked the commencement of the Revolution.

In late October of 1774, Lord Dunmore and his army imposed a treaty of peace on the Shawnee Indians and marched to the east. Arriving back at Fort Gower from their campaign the officers of the army received anxiously-awaited news from Philadelphia about the decisions taken by the First Continental Congress which had concluded only a few days earlier. The news from Philadelphia was electrifying: The Continental Congress had made strongly worded declarations asserting the rights of British Americans and had called for addresses of both remonstrance and loyalty to the King.

Responding immediately to the news from Philadelphia, and assembled beside that rude log building, the officers of the army EXPRESSED THE SPIRIT OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE and asserted their rights in a written address to the King. History calls that document the Fort Gower Resolves. Present among those officers were William Campbell of Aspenvale in present Smyth County, Andrew Lewis of Salem, Daniel Morgan of Winchester, George Rogers Clark of Caroline County, William Russell of present Russell County, Adam Stephen of Berkeley County, and many other notable patriots. William Christian who lived on the New River in Fincastle County had left Fort Gower a few days earlier to carry news of the campaign's success back to Williamsburg and to his brother-in-law, Patrick Henry.

Later, after six long years of war, William Campbell would become the "Hero of King's Mountain" in the only battle of the Revolutionary War fought solely by riflemen. Thomas Jefferson called King's Mountain "The battle that turned the tide of the war."

Daniel Morgan, of whom it has been written "Served everywhere — surrendered nowhere" would go on in later years to command Virginia riflemen at the battles of Saratoga and Cowpens where they gave key support to the musket-equipped troops-of-the-line.

Andrew Lewis, William Russell, and Adam Stephen would all go on to become Revolutionary War Generals. George Matthews of Augusta County would go on to serve twice as Governor of Georgia; Isaac Shelby of Sapling Grove (now Bristol) would go on to serve twice as Governor of Kentucky. James Wood of Winchester would go on to become the eleventh governor of Virginia.

It was a distinguished "band of brothers" who assembled at Fort Gower.

The officers at Fort Gower made two Resolves. One, very brief, merely stated that they held the greatest respect for the Right Honourable Lord Dunmore.

Their other Resolve, after stating that "we will bear the most faithful Allegiance to his Majesty King George III," went on to say: "But as the Love of Liberty, and Attachment to the real Interests and just Rights of America outweigh every other Consideration, we resolve that we will exert every Power within us for the Defence of American Liberty, and for the Support of her just Rights and Privileges."

That powerful statement, perhaps coming from British Virginians for the very first time, explicitly warned the King of England that the Virginia officers were prepared to fight him.

The Richmond historian Harry Ward has written: "The [Fort Gower] document exudes the officers' confidence in their military ability and their sense of fraternal pride." Let me read you a little from the preamble to their Resolves:

These are the officers speaking:

...[W]hen it is considered that we can live Weeks without Bread or Salt, that we can sleep in the open Air without any Covering but that of the Canopy of Heaven, and that our Men can march and shoot with any in the known World. Blessed with these Talents, let us solemnly engage to one another, and our Country, ... that we will use them to no Purpose but for the Honour and Advantage of America in general, and of Virginia in particular.

The officers' Resolves were published in Williamsburg a few weeks later in the *Virginia Gazette* in the issue of December 22nd, 1774. Because of this publication, the Fort Gower Resolves, quickly became widely known throughout the Virginia colony. Once in print, they were read by and influenced the leading Virginia patriots.

The influence of the published Fort Gower Resolves was significant — and evidence for that influence came rapidly. Men in the Virginia frontier counties of Augusta, Botetourt, and Fincastle, held meetings and adopted their own assertions of rights — and published their own Resolves.

Leading Virginians such as Richard Henry Lee, George Mason, Patrick Henry, and George Washington took note of what had happened at Hockingport on the Ohio River and marveled at the military prowess of the Virginia riflemen.

In a letter to his brother Arthur Lee, dated 24th of February 1775, Richard Henry Lee wrote:

The inclosed Address to the Virginia Delegates published a few days since in the *Gazette* will shew you the spirit of the Frontier Men ... The six frontier Counties can produce 6000 of these Men who from their amazing hardihood, their method of living so long in the woods without carrying provisions with them, the exceeding quickness with which they can march to distant parts, and above all, the dexterity to which they have arrived in the use of the Rifle Gun.

Within three months of their publication, the Fort Gower Resolves also became known in England. Copies of *Virginia Gazette* traveled by ship across the Atlantic and the Resolves, as printed in the *Gazette*, were read out loud by the Marquis of Rockingham during a debate in the House of Lords in London on the sixteenth of March of 1775.

Had the Lords listened more carefully to the words written by the officers at Fort Gower, the subsequent course of history might have been very different.

During 1775 the rifle and the hunting shirt became symbols for the Virginia patriots. On the sixth of February 1775, George Mason wrote to George Washington saying that men who could afford them should procure "riphel guns," form a company of marksmen, and wear hunting shirts.

In April of 1775, Governor Dunmore, without warning, removed the colony's gunpowder from the magazine in Williamsburg. British marines took it to Royal naval vessel. In response, a

thousand Virginians wearing hunting shirts assembled in Fredericksburg. Among them were 600 riflemen. All were ready to take orders from Patrick Henry and begin a military campaign.

Their threat to march to Williamsburg forced Dunmore to have Patrick Henry paid £300 pounds money for the powder. Simultaneously Dunmore took flight to the English warship HMS Fowey on the York River.

By June of 1775, Dunmore — now escaped from Williamsburg to Norfolk — announced that he would only return to Williamsburg "provided the shirtmen [were] sent away." That same month, many of the Burgesses attended the opening session of the General Assembly wearing hunting shirts.

On the nineteenth of June 1775, future President James Madison wrote to a friend in Pennsylvania saying "the strength of this Colony will lie chiefly in the rifle-men of the Upland Counties, of whom we shall have a great number."

Virginians were now looking westward for the men who could win the War of Independence.

By August of 1775 companies of western Virginia riflemen, along with rifle companies from Maryland and Pennsylvania, were on their way to Boston to join in the War. A year later with the riflemen's terms of enlistment about to expire, George Washington wrote of them that they were "Indeed a very useful Corps."

We conclude that the exploits and Resolves of the western Virginia militiamen in the Ohio country in late 1774 emboldened and encouraged the Virginia Patriots in 1775.

After the publication of the Fort Gower Resolves, Virginians began for the first time to contemplate seriously that the Americans could beat the British if war came.

So I say thank you to the patriots of Western Virginia. On November the fifth of 1774 you took a key step in launching Virginians on their way to Independence.

And my thanks to all of you for granting me the opportunity to tell you this story.

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Posted 2 July 2012 to www.holstonia.net.