

Lord Dunmore's Proclamation on Slave Emancipation (1775)

This historic proclamation, dated November 7, 1775 and issued from on board a British warship lying off Norfolk, Virginia, by royal governor and Scottish aristocrat John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, offered the first large-scale emancipation of slave and servant labor in the history of colonial British America. It grew out of Dunmore's efforts to counter an impending attack on his capital of Williamsburg by patriot militia in the spring of 1775, when he several times threatened to free and arm slaves to defend the cause of royal government. By the time he retreated offshore he was already gathering slaves seeking refuge; his November proclamation commanding Virginians to support the crown or be judged traitors now formally offered freedom to all slaves and indentured servants belonging to rebels and able to bear arms for the crown. Within weeks, several hundred slaves, many with their families, had joined him. They enlisted in what Dunmore christened his "Ethiopian Regiment" and formed the bulk of the royal troops that first defeated patriot forces but then fell victim to disease and attack, evacuating the Chesapeake Region for New York by August 1776.

Dunmore's proclamation offered freedom only to those who would flee from rebel masters and serve the crown. Its purpose was strategic, to disable rebellion, rather than humanitarian, yet its effect was rather the reverse. White southerner colonists swung to oppose royal authority as it appeared that Dunmore and his "Damned, infernal, Diabolical" proclamation were inciting slave insurrection: nothing, it can be argued, so quickly lost the South for the crown. British officialdom, however, never repudiated the proclamation's message and soon established an alliance with black Americans that brought thousands of escaped southern slaves to the side of the British forces operating in the south. The role and plight of these fugitives during and after the Revolutionary War would alter the course of a host of black lives and help swell sentiment, particularly in Britain, for an end to slavery and the slave trade. A short-term failure, Dunmore's proclamation set in motion events far beyond its author's intentions.

Sources:

Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961); Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, and the Making of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

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TRANSCRIPTION

By His Excellency the Right Honorable JOHN Earl of DUNMORE, His MAJESTY'S Lieutenant and Governor General of the Colony and Dominion of VIRGINIA, and Vice Admiral of the fame.

A PROCLAMATION.

As I have ever entertained Hopes that an Accommodation might have taken Place between GREAT-BRITAIN and this colony, without being compelled by my Duty to this most disagreeable but now absolutely necessary Step, rendered so by a Body of armed Men unlawfully assembled, bring on His MAJESTY'S [Tenders], and the formation of an Army, and that Army now on their March to attack His MAJESTY'S troops and destroy the well disposed Subjects of this Colony. To defeat such unreasonable Purposes, and that all such Traitors, and their Abettors, may be brought to Justice, and that the Peace, and good Order of this Colony may be again restored, which the ordinary Course of the Civil Law is unable to effect; I have thought fit to issue this my Proclamation, hereby declaring, that until the aforesaid good Purposes can be obtained, I do in Virtue of the Power and Authority to ME given, by His MAJESTY, determine to execute Martial Law, and cause the same to be executed throughout this Colony: and to the end that Peace and good Order may the sooner be [effected], I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms, to [return] to His MAJESTY'S STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to His MAJESTY'S Crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the Penalty the Law inflicts upon such Offences; such as forfeiture of Life, confiscation of Lands, &c. &c. And I do hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY'S Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to His MAJESTY'S Loyal Subjects, to retain their [Quarters], or any other Taxes due or that may become due, in their own Custody, till such Time as Peace may be again restored to this at present most unhappy Country, or demanded of them for their former salutary Purposes, by Officers properly authorized to receive the same.

GIVEN under my Hand on board the ship WILLIAM, off NORPOLE, the 7th Day of NOVEMBER, in the SIXTEENTH Year of His MAJESTY'S Reign.

DUNMORE.

(GOD Save the KING.)

By His Excellency the Right Honorable JOHN Earl of DUNMORE, His
MAJESTY'S Lieutenant and Governor General of the Colony and Dominion of
VIRGINIA, and Vice Admiral of the same.

A P R O C L A M A T I O N.

AS I have ever entertained Hopes that an Accommodation might have
taken Place between GREAT-BRITAIN and this Colony, without being
compelled by my Duty to this most disagreeable but now absolutely necessary
Step, rendered so by a Body of armed Men unlawfully assembled, firing on His
MAJESTY'S TENDERS, and the formation of an Army, and that Army now on
their March to attack His MAJESTY'S Troops and destroy the well disposed Sub-
jects of this Colony. To defeat such treasonable Purposes, and that all such
Traitors, and their Abettors, may be brought to Justice, and that the Peace, and
good Order of this Colony may be again restored, which the ordinary Course
of the Civil Law is unable to effect; I have thought fit to issue this my Pro-
clamation, hereby declaring, that until the aforesaid good Purposes can be ob-
tained, I do in Virtue of the Power and Authority to ME given, by His MAJE-
STY, determine to execute Martial Law, and cause the same to be executed
throughout this Colony: and to the end that Peace and good Order may the
sooner be effected, I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms, to resort
to His MAJESTY'S STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to His
MAJESTY'S Crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the Penalty
the Law inflicts upon such Offences; such as forfeiture of Life, confiscation of
Lands, &c. &c. And I do hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes,
or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms,
they joining His MAJESTY'S Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily
reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to His MAJESTY'S
Crown and Dignity. I do further order, and require, all His MAJESTY'S Loyal
Subjects, to retain their Quivents, or any other Taxes due or that may become
due, in their own Custody, till such Time as Peace may be again restored to this
at present most unhappy Country, or demanded of them for their former salu-
tary Purposes, by Officers properly authorized to receive the same.

GIVEN under my Hand on board the Ship WILLIAM, off NORFOLK,
the 7th Day of NOVEMBER, in the SIXTEENTH Year of His MAJESTY'S Reign.

DUNMORE.

(GOD save the KING.)