

## Orange County Men Fight in the Revolution

Based on the work of Historian William H.B. Thomas in "Patriots of the Upcountry", this summary is a companion to "Pre-Revolutionary Action in Orange County" and "The British in Orange County during the Revolution". Thomas's work recounts the military service of Orange County men and the battles they experienced from 1776-1781.

In **May 1776** the fifth Virginia Convention convened in Williamsburg, and **James Madison, Jr., and his kinsmen William Moore were the delegates representing Orange County.** Young Madison was only 25 years old. During this meeting the House of Burgesses had been unable to muster a quorum, and therefore, had passed out of existence as a legislative body. Further, the Royal governor had abandoned the capital, so without legal sanction, Richard Henry Lee declared that this convention was for "...the indispensable necessity of our taking up government immediately, for the preservation of Society."<sup>1</sup>

"At Williamsburg, for so many years the seat of colonial empire and soon to be the scene of quickening steps toward independence, Madison found many delegates already on hand and others steadily arriving. As usual, some wore elegant dress; some, informal attire. Among his colleagues were men of acknowledged leadership in Virginia--Edmund Pendleton, once more to be the president of the Convention, Richard Bland and Robert Carter Nicholas; Archibald Cary and George Mason; and Patrick Henry, having resigned his military commission, taking up again a vital political role. Not only did age, experience, and accomplishments set these men apart from Madison, their appearance distinguished them from the Orange County delegate. He was, it was later said, 'probably the only very small man in the Convention of 1776.' Of slender stature, he stood a half foot shorter than those of his associates reputed to be six feet or more in height."<sup>2</sup>

The first few days of the convention were devoted to regular business including committee assignments. Madison was named to the Privileges and Elections committee. A week later he was added to the "special committee" that was to prepare a Declaration of Rights and to create a plan of government to maintain peace and order in the colony and to secure liberty for the people. Madison had previously studied government which would be useful in the days ahead.

On **May 10** delegates from Augusta County presented their sentiments to the Convention: "...representing the necessity of making the confederacy of the United Colonies the most perfect, independent, and lasting, and of framing an equal, free, and liberal government, that may bear the test of all future ages."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William H.B. Thomas, "Patriots of the Upcountry" (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

On **May 15** the Convention met as a whole to consider the state of the colony. Before it was the statement from Augusta and several resolutions for independence. A final resolution by Edmund Pendleton had been drafted which recited all the colonial efforts to restore peace under the British government which had produced not a redress of grievances, but instead insult, oppression, and “a vigorous attempt to effect [sic] our total destruction.” The resolution concluded by instructing the delegates to the General Congress “to propose to that respectable body to declare the United Colonies free and independent states, absolved from all allegiance to, or dependence upon, the crown or parliament of Great Britain...”<sup>4</sup>

The Convention unanimously adopted the resolution of independence which was received enthusiastically, first by Williamsburg residents, then elsewhere in Virginia as the word spread. A celebration was held at Waller’s Grove on the outskirts of Williamsburg where on **May 16** members of the Committee of Safety, delegates to the Convention, and the local populace congregated. Troops paraded, the resolution was read, and toasts were made “to the American independent states; the General Congress of the United States, and their respective legislatures, and General Washington and victory to the American arms.”<sup>5</sup> Everyone was pleased that domination by Great Britain was at an end after the last twelve or thirteen years. Work on a declaration of rights and a plan of government was set to begin.

The committee creating a state government was mostly under the influence of George Mason. However, young Madison challenged him on his wording for the proposed declaration of rights. Madison wanted the disestablishment of the church, but at that time the separation of church and state was not yet acceptable thinking among the people or the delegates. The committee, then the Convention, adopted a final draft that reflected Madison’s thinking that religion should be “according to the dictates of conscience.” In doing this, religion was recognized as a *natural right*. “In his work in the Convention generally and in his contributions to drafting the declaration of rights in particular, Madison had begun his career of public service with distinction. Other and greater responsibilities awaited him.”<sup>6</sup>

On **June 12th** the Convention adopted the “Declaration of Rights”, one the great documents in American history. It “held that all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights. . . .namely, the enjoyment of liberty with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.”<sup>7</sup>

By then Virginia’s resolution of May 15 had been received in Philadelphia. On **June 7** Richard Henry Lee had proposed to the Congress: “That these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States . . . .”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

“Shortly, **Jefferson was at work--with a draft of Virginia's Declaration of Rights before him--on a declaration of independence for all the colonies.** In its preparation Jefferson owed much to what his fellow Virginians had already so eloquently expressed. ‘A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America...’ adopted by the Continental Congress on **July 4, 1776**, was proclaimed in Williamsburg on July 25. It was announced and read at the capitol, the courthouse, and the Palace ‘amidst the acclamation of the people, accompanied by firing of cannon and musketry, the several regiments of continental troops having been paraded on that solemnity.’ ” <sup>9</sup>

On **July 5, 1776**, the day after the Declaration of Independence was adopted, the Virginia Convention met for the last time. Patrick Henry took the oath of office as the first governor of the Commonwealth. The last week in June, the Convention had accepted and approved the plan of government drafted by the committee, of which **James Madison was a member.** In place was a constitutional government of a sovereign state.<sup>10</sup>

With the work of Madison and other delegates accomplished, their thoughts turned to waging war, vital if the Convention’s work was to be successful. They knew that their lives and their fortunes were at stake in the struggle against Great Britain; therefore, raising and equipping troops and securing ammunition were utmost in the minds of Virginia’s leaders.

“Earlier in 1776 the Convention had provided for a total of nine regiments of infantry--seven of which were new--both for local defense and as the ‘Virginia Line on Continental Establishment.’ During the spring recruiting went on vigorously. **In Orange County, Captains Joseph Spencer, Francis Taylor, and George Stubblefield, ranging the area, were filling up their quotas. Joining again under Joseph Spencer, former minuteman Reuben Stivers was now serving as a musician. Others enlisting with Spencer included Benjamin Adams, James Alexander, John Brady, James Coghill, Henry Hill, and Zachariah Taylor. Among Captain Francis Taylor’s men were Edward Atkins--he, too, had been a minuteman--James Beazley, John Bourn, James Brown, Jacob Burrus, James Burton, Robert Chandler, John Davis, John Snow, and John Taylor. In George Stubblefield’s company were John Atkins and Reuben Cave.**

“Each company recruited in the Orange County area was taken into the Virginia Line. **Captain Joseph Spencer’s reported to the Seventh Virginia Regiment under Colonel William Daingerfield and, shortly thereafter, Lieutenant Colonel (later Colonel) Alexander McClanahan; Captain Francis Taylor’s, to the Second Virginia under Colonel William Woodford; and Captain George Stubblefield’s, to the Fifth Virginia under Colonel William Peachy.**”<sup>11</sup>

As all these events occurred, the Royal governor, Lord Dunmore, was apprehensive and concerned about the position of the British fleet off Hampton Roads so he had the fleet move up

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

the Chesapeake Bay to Gwynn's Island off Gloucester (present-day Mathews) County. The island was at the mouth of the Piankatank River and separated from the mainland by the narrow Milford Haven channel which was only sixty yards wide. It was there that Dunmore unloaded troops ridiculed as "pirates and renegades" by the *Virginia Gazette*. Dunmore's troops included troops and ex-slaves freed by Dunmore for fighting with the British.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the **first week of July**, the Virginia Commander, Brigadier General Andrew Lewis, arrived with Continental Line troops to reinforce the American position opposite Gwynn's Island. **Among those were the Orange County companies of Captains Francis Taylor and Joseph Spencer. Taylor was under William Woodford in the Second Virginia Regiment and Spencer under Lieutenant Colonel Alexander McClanahan of the Seventh. Taylor's men included John Bourn, James Brown, Jacob Burrus, John Snow, and John Taylor; and McClanahan's included Sergeant James Alexander, Musician Reuben Stivers, Benjamin Adams, John Brady, James Coghill and 16 year old Zachariah Taylor.**

"These were regulars, and from headquarters had come orders that the 'men appear as uniform as possible in their Dress.' Their hats were to be 'cocked in Fashion,' their hair 'cut exactly the same length,' and, when the regiment was under arms, officers were to wear hunting shirts, dyed the same color as their men's. [Brigadier General] Andrew Lewis had stressed the importance of uniformity and neatness: these essentials might appear trivial, 'but they are in fact of considerable importance, as they tend to give what is call'd Esprit de Corps, without which Regiments never grow to Reputation.' "<sup>13</sup>

General Lewis found that high ground was on Gloucester shore. Across the channel on Gwynn's Island, the British had a four-gun battery and extensive breastworks. Closeby were other batteries and a stockaded fort as well as the British fleet consisting of the men-of-war *Dunmore*, *Roebuck*, *Otter*, and *Fowey* and several other tenders and small vessels positioned at the Milford Haven channel. Nevertheless on Tuesday morning, **July 9**, General Lewis took the opportunity to "chastise the noble Earl" [Dunmore] when he himself put a match to the first American gun--an 18 pounder--to begin the bombardment of the British shipping and land positions.<sup>14</sup>

That shot hit the *Dunmore* causing much damage. Then American six and nine pounders opened up before an eighteen pound shot cut the boatswain of *Dunmore* in two, wounding several, followed by a nine-pounder hitting the ship's quarters. Flying slivers of wood wounded Lord Dunmore in the leg. After about 30 minutes, the *Dunmore* slipped out of range of the cannonade. The next British ship the Americans went after was the *Otter* which, like the *Dunmore*, slipped her cables and pulled away to escape without firing a shot. In the confusion other British ships, especially those close to land, fled. Americans continued to bombard enemy ships and British positions on Gwynn's Island. The bombardment had begun at 9:30 and lasted

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

thirty minutes. American General Lewis began again at noon as bombardment was all he could do since he had no way to transport his troops across Milford Haven to attack Gwynn's Island.

"All Tuesday night the Americans searched neighboring creeks and inlets and checked wharves and docks for boats, even canoes, that could carry troops across the channel. The [Americans] commenced firing early the next morning. A British sloop mounting six carriage guns, the *Lady Charlotte*, briskly answered the Americans. But then she went aground and her crew had to abandon ship. **Men of the Seventh Regiment under Captain Gregory Smith, including John Almond and William Campbell of Orange County, were ordered to board the *Lady Charlotte*.** Thus far McClanahan's soldiers had merely watched the action; now they would get their chance to share it. [Captain] Smith first went after the fleeing crew, however, and managed to capture some....So impressive was the sight of Smith's men pursuing the crew toward Gwynn's Island that British lookouts shouted, 'The shirtmen are coming' and themselves abandoned their posts."<sup>15</sup> The British fled and the Americans had won a victory.

Twelve days later orders were issued from American headquarters that the Declaration [of Independence] was to be read in Williamsburg and all troops off duty were to attend. Orange County men were present, those who had done their part in routing the enemy, are thought to have joined the reading and the celebration that followed.<sup>16</sup>

Having abandoned Gwynn's Island with his fleet in poor condition, Lord Dunmore maneuvered for a while in the Chesapeake Bay and on the Potomac River, but on **August 9** the Virginia *Gazette* reported that "the Right Honorable the Earl of Dunmore, Viscount Fincastle and Baron Murray of Blair, Mouilli, and Tilliment, after dividing his fleet and burning ten or a dozen vessels, took leave of the capes of Virginia, where he has, for more than a twelve month past, perpetrated crimes that would even have disgraced the noted pirate BLACKBEARD."<sup>17</sup>

By the end of summer 1776 most of the Virginia Continental Line was in the north. By the early months of **1777**, fifteen Virginia regiments had joined the American army under Washington. After leaving New Jersey, Sir William Howe, commander of British forces, invaded Pennsylvania and clashed with Washington along Brandywine Creek, southwest of Philadelphia, on Sept. 11, 1777. At Chad's Ford, American commander Nathaniel Greene held the center while to the left, downstream, were the Pennsylvania militia. On Greene's right, upstream, were John Sullivan's troops. One of the supporting divisions was Adam Stephen (under William Woodford, by then brigade commander) who had among his regiments his own Second Virginia and Alexander McClanahan's Seventh Virginia. **In the Second was Captain Francis Taylor's Orange company; in the Seventh was Captain Joseph Spencer.**<sup>18</sup>

"The British commander, Sir William Howe moving toward the Brandywine, engaged the attention of the American center with cannon fire. He then sent Lord Cornwallis upstream in a

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

movement to flank the Americans right under Sullivan. Crossing the Brandywine above Sullivan, Cornwallis launched a vigorous attack on that officer and forced his divisions back. Washington, learning of the threatened assault, had sent off supporting troops that included Stephen's division with Woodford and his Virginia regiments. Later, the commanding general ordered Nathaniel Greene and his strong division to Sullivan's assistance. Shortly Woodford was heavily engaged; he himself was wounded and had to leave the field. His regiments, fighting savagely, suffered grievously. Men [were] stabbed with bayonets, grappled with bare hands. The Seventh Virginia was torn to pieces. Its color-bearer went down, with him the colors. **In Joseph Spencer's company Benjamin Adams was wounded; but other Orange County men, including Spencer, Sergeant James Alexander, Musician Reuben Stivers, James Coghill, and seventeen-year-old Zachariah Taylor, giving ground reluctantly, were unhurt.**"<sup>19</sup>

Nathaniel Greene and his division plunged into action, crossing the Brandywine at Chad's Ford, forcing the remaining Americans to retreat. With the coming of darkness, however, the British broke off their assault. **"What was left of the Seventh Virginia--Spencer's regiment--hid in the woods that night to escape notice by the British, and stumbled into the American camp the next day.** The regiment proudly bore as its colors a red bandanna handkerchief fixed to the end of a ramrod."<sup>20</sup>

Americans were defeated at Brandywine. **"For Orange County men involved it had been a day of hard fighting, a day of service well performed, a day long to be remembered. Others from Orange on the field in addition to Joseph Spencer and his roughly handled soldiers were, of course, Francis Taylor and his company of the Second Virginia that included Edward Atkins, James Beazley, John Bourn, Jacob Burruss, William Davis, and John Snow. Captain George Stubblefield and his Orange company, including John Atkins, served with the fifth Virginia, Major Richard Taylor with the Ninth, among rank and file was Nathaniel Mothershead. In the desperate fighting of the later afternoon Mothershead, stuck in the right arm, was seriously wounded. Captain William Campbell was with the First Virginia State Regiment, sent north to serve with the regular troops; and Lieutenant Francis Cowherd saw service in the Second."**<sup>21</sup>

Following Brandywine, the British took Philadelphia on September 26. But Washington attacked at Germantown, not far from Philadelphia, in a two hour battle and came close to victory. **Orange County soldiers saw hard fighting at Germantown. They included Captains Taylor and Spencer and their companies and most of the others who had been at Brandywine.** Then during the winter of 1777-78, Orange troops shared **"in the suffering at Valley Forge--"poor food--hard lodging--Cold Weather--fatigue--Nasty Cloaths--nasty cookery...."**<sup>22</sup> In the spring of 1778 some Orange County men were discharged at Valley Forge including Benjamin Adams, Jacob Burrus, James Coghill and perhaps others.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 47.

At the Battle of Monmouth of June 28, 1778, **Orange County men again participated including Solomon Belew who was a wagoner.** Afterwards military operations in the north began to slow down, but the war accelerated in the South. In late 1778 the British began transferring troops to Georgia. Savannah was taken in **1779** and Sir Henry Clinton, Howe's successor, landed near Charleston, South Carolina which was controlled by the Americans. Clinton laid siege to the city and demolished its outer defenses. On May 12 Charleston fell. **Among the Americans taken prisoner were virtually all of the Virginia line units, including the Second Virginia, of which Richard Taylor, father of President Zachary Taylor, was Lieutenant colonel.** Clinton returned to New York and left Cornwallis in command.

The Continental Congress appointed Horatio Gates commander of troops in the South. **His forces, reinforced by militia from North Carolina and Virginia, including several men from Orange County. Joseph Spencer, having resigned his command in the fall of 1777 was back on the battlefield as a lieutenant colonel in the Virginia militia. Among his fourteen months of duty, Spencer fought at Camden, South Carolina in 1780 when the Americans could not rout Gate's army. Also there was Thomas Walker of Orange. Serving at the same time in Capt Robert Daniel's company of Colonel George Stubblefield's regiment, Walker was badly wounded by a musket ball that fractured his left arm and wrist.**<sup>23</sup>

General Nathaniel Greene replaced Gates as commander of the South and "his excellent strategy in the ensuing year reversed the sorry state of affairs following Gate's defeat. **Several Orange County men were in the battles of Guilford Court House and Eutaw Springs and in the siege of Ninety-Six. Two were soldiers who had served under Joseph Spencer when that officer had commanded a company, John Price and Henry Hill; a third, William B. Branham had enlisted in Orange County in the fall of 1780; and John Snow, who was with Francis Taylor at Brandywine and Germantown, had the stock of his gun shot off at Eutaw Springs.**

"In the decisive military campaign of **1781**, Lord Cornwallis, having shifted his operations to Virginia, was trapped at Yorktown. In the siege of that port town by the Americans, **militiamen from Orange County participated. Seventeen-year-old William Collins was also there, serving in a contingent under General Anthony Wayne; Nathaniel Mothershead was also there, still not wholly recovered from the severe wound he received at Brandywine. James Ballard would have been at the siege, but he had been ordered out to scout through the country for the Tories; and John Graves was present, later guarding prisoners that were taken. Two others of familiar name were in at the end: James Beazley, one of Francis Taylor's original recruits and a veteran of Brandywine and Germantown; and Zachariah Taylor, with Joseph Spencer in the beginning and through those battles as well, who was celebrating by then his twenty-first year of age. And Colonel Thomas Barbour, acting county lieutenant of Orange, led a contingent from the upcounty to Yorktown.**"<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.