

Essex County Museum and Historical Society Bulletin



VOLUME 64

TAPPAHANNOCK, VIRGINIA

AUGUST 2017

THE ROAD TO REVOLUTION IN ESSEX COUNTY: 1765 -1766

The Stamp Act, the Leedstown Resolutions and the Ritchie Affair

By Wright H. Andrews

In 1763, the Seven Years War, which involved most of the major European powers, ended with the Treaty of Paris.

This settlement included this broad global conflict's American portion, which we know as the French and Indian War, where the British and American colonials battled the French and their Indian allies primarily along the colonies' western borders. The British government then revised certain of its policies for dealing with its American colonies in the aftermath of the war. Parliament issued the Proclamation of 1763 that prohibited settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. This move greatly upset many leading gentlemen in Virginia, including many in the Tidewater, as they were seeking to maintain and expand their fortunes by speculating in western lands. In 1764, Parliament passed the Sugar Act, revising the tax on molasses and strengthening its enforcement. This resulted in considerable concern and colonial opposition, particularly in the New England colonies. Another subsequent measure passed the following year, the Stamp Act, caused even greater consternation and caused Virginians to become much more active in protesting and contesting the British government's new colonial policies.

The war had left England with huge debts, and Parliament took the position that the American colonies should bear more of their own defense costs. Accordingly, it passed the Stamp Act on March 22, 1765.

In essence, the Stamp Act required colonists to pay a modest tax on all of the printed documents they used. This included newspapers and publications, legal documents, ship's papers,

licenses and other printed materials. The funds collected were to be used to help pay for the 10,000 British troops stationed along the colonies' western frontier.

Colonists reacted strongly against this tax, which was viewed as a dangerous precedent for future taxation by Parliament without colonists' involvement. Earlier taxes had been deemed measures to regulate commerce, but the Stamp Act was seen as a direct tax on the colonies without approval of the colonial legislatures. Parliament's action triggered a nerve within the colonists' psyche as they saw this as imposing taxation without representation, which they deemed a violation of their basic rights as Englishmen.

Violators of the Act also were to be tried in British Admiralty Courts, thus denying colonists of a trial by a jury of their peers, which they considered another of their basic rights as Englishmen.

Citizens in various colonies engaged in a variety of protest activities against the Stamp Act. In Virginia, Patrick Henry led the opposition to the Stamp Act in the House of Burgesses. He offered a number of resolves against the Act, and on May 30, 1765 the House ultimately passed four of them, which are generally known as the Virginia Resolves.

In essence, the Resolves declared that colonists possessed the same rights as citizens living in England, including the right to be taxed only by their representatives and that these rights had heretofore always been recognized and

had never been forfeited. One of Henry's proposed resolves that was not adopted, but was widely reported, held that anyone supporting Parliament's right to tax colonists should be deemed an enemy of the colony.



Richard Henry Lee

The following four resolves offered by Patrick Henry were adopted by the House of Burgesses on May 30, 1765:

Resolved, that the first adventurers and settlers of His Majesty's colony and dominion of Virginia brought with them and transmitted to their posterity, and all other His Majesty's subjects since inhabiting in this His Majesty's said colony, all the liberties, privileges, franchises, and immunities that have at any time been held, enjoyed, and possessed by the people of Great Britain.

Resolved, that by two royal charters, granted by King James I, the colonists aforesaid are declared entitled to all liberties, privileges, and immunities of denizens and natural subjects to all intents and purposes as if they had been abiding and born within the Realm of England.

Resolved, that the taxation of the people by themselves, or by persons chosen by themselves to represent them, who can only know what taxes the people are able to bear, or the easiest method of raising them, and must themselves be affected by every tax laid on the people, is the only security against a burdensome taxation, and the distinguishing characteristic of British freedom, without which the ancient constitution cannot exist.

Resolved, that His Majesty's liege people of this his most ancient and loyal colony have without interruption enjoyed the inestimable right of being governed by such laws, respecting their internal policy and taxation, as are derived from their own consent, with the approbation of their sovereign, or his substitute; and that the same has never been forfeited or yielded up, but has been constantly recognized by the kings and people of Great Britain.

Henry's fifth resolution, which was debated but ultimately not adopted provided:

Resolved, therefore that the General Assembly of this Colony have the only and exclusive Right and Power to lay Taxes and Impositions upon the inhabitants of this Colony and that every Attempt to vest such Power in any person or persons whatsoever other than the General Assembly aforesaid has a manifest Tendency to destroy British as well as American Freedom.

The following two additional resolutions were not passed by the Virginia Assembly, but were reported in several newspapers:

Resolved, That His Majesty's liege people, the inhabitants of this Colony, are not bound to yield obedience to any law or ordinance whatever, designed to impose any taxation whatsoever upon them, other than the laws or ordinances of the General Assembly aforesaid.

Resolved, That any person who shall, by speaking or writing, assert or maintain that any person or persons other than the General Assembly of this Colony, have any right or power to impose or lay any taxation on the people here, shall be deemed an enemy to His Majesty's Colony.

Not surprisingly, Virginia's Colonial Governor Fauquier disapproved of the adoption of Henry's proposals, and accordingly he dissolved the House of Burgesses in response.

Leading citizens in Essex and other Tidewater counties were quite aware of the Stamp Act, its implications, and the debate that had taken place in the House of Burgesses. They were strongly opposed to paying the tax, both on principle and to some degree because many were facing economic difficulties as the economy was in a recession.



The Archibald Ritchie House in Tappahannock

Therefore, when Archibald Ritchie of Tappahannock, a wealthy and prominent Scottish merchant, brazenly stated publicly at the Richmond County Court in early February of 1766 that he intended to comply with the tax and buy stamps as required for his ships' documents, many opponents of the Act became both very alarmed and quite angry. They feared that if the powerful, well-known Ritchie broke ranks others would likely follow and opposition to the Stamp Act might fail.

Leading planters along the Rappahannock promptly began planning to reign in Ritchie and prevent him from supporting and complying with the Act.

It is worth noting that it appears that to some degree the leading gentry's motivation was based not only on the position Ritchie was stating but also on the fact that, while powerful, he appears to have been viewed as haughty and arrogant and was not at this point in time well liked by some of the gentry.

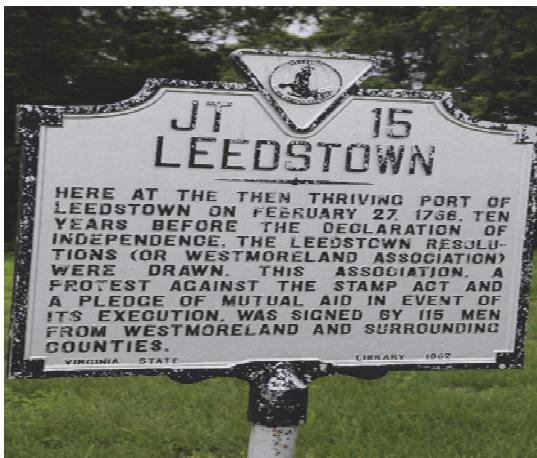
In any case, leading men like Thomas Ludwell Lee and his brother Richard Henry Lee of Westmoreland County began strongly promoting the idea of confronting Ritchie and forcing him to publicly apologize and promise not to comply with the Act.

While the Lees and others were planning for leaders from the entire Northern Neck and nearby counties to go to Tappahannock to confront Ritchie, some of the local Essex people decided they would initiate a confrontation of their own and deal with their fellow Essex resident. On Essex Court Day on February 21, 1766, around 70 people showed up for the confrontation. Col. Francis Waring and Col. William Roane (Ritchie's own brother-in-law), who both were leading citizens and had represented Essex in the House of Burgesses, were Essex County's primary opponents of the Stamp Act. They led a march to Ritchie's house where they met with him and voiced their concerns. One report says that a British Man of War in the harbor landed troops to disburse the men. Other reports say that Ritchie responded to the local citizens that he had cleared his ship out of the port without stamps and this answer reportedly was enough for the

assembled mob and they dispersed. Ritchie reportedly wrote a letter pledging not to use stamps, but, if so, this did not appease public opposition to him, especially in the Northern Neck where people believed that Ritchie had not given in to the Essex group and not adequately paid for his misguided actions.

Richard Henry Lee, and his brothers at Stratford Hall and other Northern Neck gentry including George Washington's brothers, continued their plans to have a more definitive confrontation. Thomas Ludwell Lee sent out an urgent call for leaders from various Rappahannock River Valley counties to come to a meeting to discuss opposition to the Stamp Act and how best to deal with Ritchie. Plans were to have a big meeting at Leedstown followed by a meeting in Tappahannock the next day where Ritchie would be confronted. Accordingly, on the evening of February 27, 1766 over 100 gentlemen from nearby counties – Middlesex, Essex, Caroline, Spotsylvania, Stafford, Prince William, Fredericksburg, King George, Westmoreland, Northumberland, Richmond and Lancaster – met at Old Bray's Church (or another location depending on the account) and debated how to respond. These men called themselves "Sons of Liberty" and "Friends of Liberty," as did Stamp Act opponents in some other colonies.

At the end of the day, 115 members signed on to what are called the Leedstown Resolutions, the Westmoreland Resolutions, or, more properly "The Resolutions of the Westmoreland Association in Defiance of the Stamp Act, 27 February 1766." The Resolutions, which were drafted by Richard Henry Lee, set forth the principles on which their opposition to the Stamp Act was based.

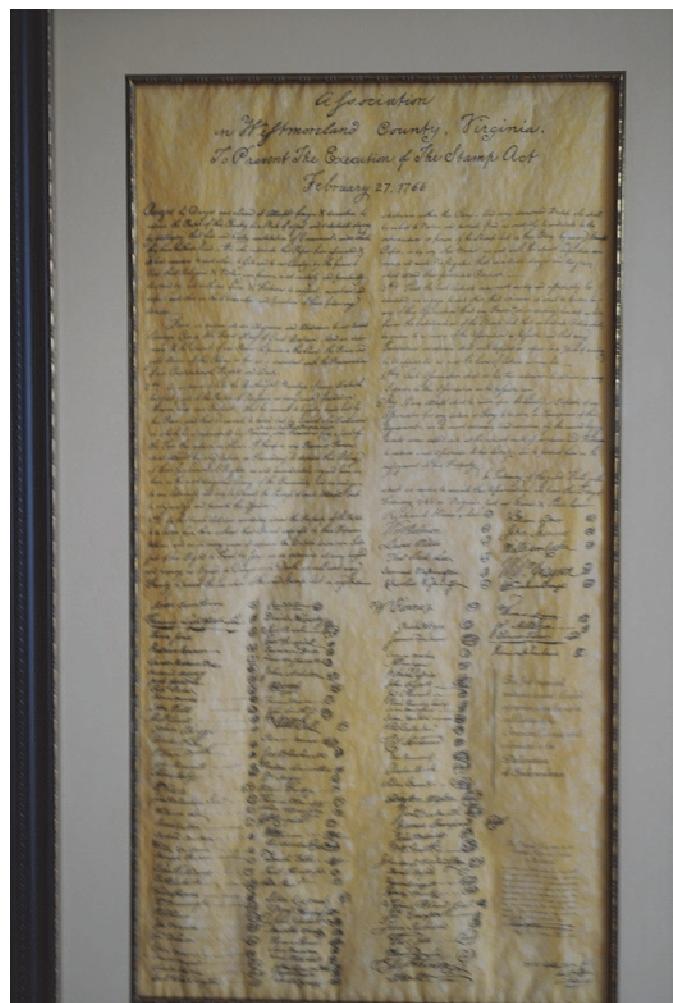


Although this is not the place for an extended discussion of Richard Henry Lee, it should be noted that he was truly one of the leading Founding Fathers of our nation, albeit that he is far less well known than many others. Lee, among other things, served in the House of Burgesses and there was a strong opponent to the Stamp Act. He later served as President of the Continental Congress, he offered the resolution in Congress calling for American Independence, he signed the Declaration of Independence, and was one of Virginia's first Senators after Independence.

Richard Henry Lee and his brother Francis Lightfoot Lee, our Chapter's patron from Menokin, both signed the Leedstown Resolutions.

The fourteen signers from Essex County included; James Edmondson, John Lee, William Roane, Meriwether Smith, John Upshaw, Francis Waring, John Bland, Jr., James

Booker, John Edmondson, Jr. and Sr., Ebeneezer Fisher, Reuben Meriwether, James Webb and Smith Young.



The Resolutions of the Westmoreland Association in Defiance of the Stamp Act, 27 February 1766

The Resolutions provided as follows:

“Roused by danger and alarmed at attempts, foreign and domestic, to reduce the people of this country to a state of abject and detestable slavery by destroying that free and happy condition of government under which they have hitherto lived, We, who subscribe this paper, have associated and do bind ourselves to each other, to God, and to our country, by the firmest ties that religion and virtue can frame, most sacredly and punctually to stand by and with our lives and fortunes, to support, maintain, and defend each other in the observance and execution of these following articles –

FIRST: We declare all due allegiance and obedience to our lawful Sovereign, George the Third, King of Great Britain. And we determine to the utmost of our power to preserve the laws, the peace and good order of this Colony, as far as is consistent with the preservation of our Constitutional rights and liberty.

SECONDLY: As we know it to be the Birthright privilege of every British subject (and of the people of Virginia as being such) founded on Reason, Law, and Compact; that he cannot be legally tried, but by his peers; that he cannot be taxed, but

by consent of a Parliament, in which he is represented by persons chosen by the people, and who themselves pay a part of the tax they impose on others. If, therefore, any person or persons shall attempt, by any action, or proceeding, to deprive this Colony of these fundamental rights, we will immediately regard him or them, as the most dangerous enemy of the community; and we will go to any extremity, not only to prevent the success of such attempts, but to stigmatize and punish the offender.

THIRDLY: As the Stamp Act does absolutely direct the property of the people to be taken from them without their consent expressed by their representatives and as in many cases it deprives the British American Subject of his right to trial by jury; we do determine, at every hazard, and paying no regard to danger or to death, we will exert every faculty, to prevent the execution of the said Stamp Act in any instance whatsoever within this Colony. And every abandoned wretch, who shall be so lost to virtue and public good, as wickedly to contribute to the introduction or fixture of the Stamp Act in this Colony, by using stamp paper, or by any other means, we will, with the utmost expedition, convince all such profligates that immediate danger and disgrace shall attend their prostitute purposes.

FOURTHLY: That the last article may most surely and effectually be executed, we engage to each other, that whenever it shall be known to any of this association, that any person is so conducting himself as to favor the introduction of the Stamp Act, that immediate notice shall be given to as many of the association as possible; and that every individual so informed, shall, with expedition, repair to a place of meeting to be appointed as near the scene of action as may be.

FIFTHLY: Each associator shall do his true endeavor to obtain as many signers to this association, as he possibly can.

SIXTHLY: If any attempt shall be made on the liberty or property of any associator for any action or thing to be done in consequence of this agreement, we do most solemnly bind ourselves by the sacred engagements above entered into, at the risk of our lives and fortunes, to restore such associate to his liberty and to protect him in the enjoyment of his property.

In testimony of the good faith with which we resolve to execute this association we have this 27th day of February 1766 in Virginia, put our hands and seals hereto."



Customs House, Tappahannock

After adopting the resolutions, most of the gentlemen proceeded the next morning to take the ferry across the Rappahannock at Layton's Landing near Leedstown and rode to Tappahannock to confront Ritchie. When they arrived, their ranks were greatly inflated by many smaller planters and area residents who had been alerted to what was going to occur.

About 400 men lined the streets near Ritchie's home, which then was what is now known as the Customs House. A Committee went to Ritchie and immediately demanded that he take an oath supporting the Resolutions and sign a statement of apology and promise not to abide by the Act. He was advised that the alternative was that "his Person should be taken and stripp'd Naked to his Waist, tied to the tail of a cart, and drawn to the public Pillory, where he should be fixed for One Hour, and if in that Time he did not comply, that he should be brought up by the Whole Company to Leedstown, there to be farther determined on as should seem expedient to the Friends of Liberty."

Ritchie asked for time to consider the situation, but his plea was rejected. He accordingly signed and swore to the following statement which the Committee presented to him:

"Sensible now of the high insult I offered this country by declaring at Richmond Court lately, my determination to make use of Stamp Paper for clearing out my Vessels; and being Convinced such Proceeding would establish a Precedent by which the hateful Stamp Act might be introduced into this Colony, to the Utter Destruction of Public Liberty; I do most submissively, in Presence of the Public, Sign this Paper meaning to show my deep Remorse, for having formed so execrable a Design: and I do hereby solemnly Promise and Swear on the Holy Evangelists, that no Vessel of mine shall sail cleared on Stamp Paper, and that I never will on any Pretense make Use of, or Cause to be made Use of Stamp Paper, unless the Use of such Paper, shall be authorized by the General Assembly of this Colony."

This Tappahannock gathering was reportedly the largest public protest in Virginia against the Stamp Act. It was front page news later in an article in the May 16, 1766 issue of the *Virginia Gazette*.

Ritchie learned his lesson, and later became an ardent patriot.

Interestingly, however, Tappahannock's second leading Scottish merchant, Archibald McCall, who held the post of

The Bulletin is published by the
Essex County Museum & Historical Society.
P.O. Box 404, Tappahannock, VA 22560
Barbara Sethmann, Editor
Publications@ecmhs.org

King's Attorney (i.e., prosecutor), nonetheless still vowed to enforce the Stamp Act. Accordingly, another mob gathered on May 6, 1766, about 2 months after Ritchie's apology, and moved to McCall's house, which we know as the Brockenbrough House on St. Margaret's school campus. There are only limited accounts of all that may have happened, but apparently the crowd smashed windows, shot guns, and may have physically assaulted McCall. McCall's later attempt to prosecute the rioters got nowhere.

In any case, Stamp Act protests came to an end shortly after the McCall incident.



McCall-Brockenbrough House at St. Margaret's School

The Stamp Act was repealed on March 18, 1766, but this news did not reach the colonies for several months. It was announced in the *Virginia Gazette* on May 22nd and a formal Proclamation of its repeal was issued in Williamsburg on June 9, 1766.



Wright H. Andrews, Jr. lives with his wife Lisa at Hazelwood, their home on the Rappahannock River about 5 miles above Tappahannock. A Life Member of the Essex Museum and Historical Society, he worked as an attorney in Washington for over 40 years.

Essex County residents can be proud of their forefathers' actions to defend colonial citizens' rights in these Stamp Act protests. The Ritchie affair clearly demonstrated, about a decade before the Revolution began, that Virginia colonists were informed and concerned regarding governmental policies. Leading gentry in Essex and the Northern Neck were in close communication and came together to put forth united opposition to the Act and to the underlying fundamental problems it raised in denying colonists their historical rights as Englishmen, including being taxed only by their chosen representatives and the right to a trial by their peers. This pre-Revolution incident shows how the leading gentry were aware of and acting in concert with positions taken in other colonies, and quite significantly, how the gentry were able to draw in smaller planters and rally them to fight for colonists' rights.

Source:

Colonial Williamsburg website which cites John Pendleton Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1761-1765* (Richmond, Va., 1907)

Author's Note: This overview of how colonists in Essex and nearby Virginia counties reacted to the Stamp Act along the road to the American Revolution is derived from numerous sources readily found on the Internet. Those interested in more details may wish to consult the informative accounts of these events found in Chapter 3 of Slaughter's *History of Essex County, VA*, and an article available online in the Essex County Museum and Historical Society's Archive from May 1975 entitled "Tappahannock and the Stamp Act." It is also interesting to read the original article about the Leedstown affair that appeared in the May 1766 edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, which is also available online via Colonial Williamsburg's site.

Although he was born in SC, his mother, Hazel Mae Brooks, grew up in Essex County, and he started coming here regularly when he was 6 months old to visit her family. He and Lisa, now an attorney with offices in Warsaw, bought their home here over 30 years ago and moved here full time about 2 years ago. Wright is a charter member of the Rappahannock Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution.

Museum Hours

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday 10 a.m. until 3 p.m.

Museum Docents

Sally Acree	Barbara Frazier	Linda Lumpkin	Rick Stott
Jean Banks	John Frazier	Suzi Maggard	Carl Strock
Tommy Blackwell	Betty Anne "BooBoo" Garrett	Dorothy Miller	Sandy Tate
Emily Brazell	Mac Garrett	Joan Moore	Pam Underhill
Betty Jo Butler	Penny Geiger, Docent Coordinator	Chey Morgan	Priscilla Vaughan
Tara Coble	Ron Geiger	Frank Owen	Helen Ware
Bill Croxton	Peyton Guest	Howard Reisinger	Kia Ware
Carole Croxton	Patricia Haile	Barry Robertson	Joe Wolfinger
Sarah Croxton	Anita Harrower	Patti Rowley	Fred Woodard
Jessica Davis	Dale Harter	Jane Schreiber	C. Norman Wood
Keren Ellis	Bill Jester	Barbara Sethmann	
Bob Erickson	Lorraine Jester	Diane Sisson	
Hilda Fletcher	Joe Johnston	Phil Stinchcomb	

Tommy Blackwell, *President*
Kay Carlton
Stanley Clarke
Bill Croxton, *Second Vice President*
Ron Geiger, *Past President/Financial Officer*
Ronnie Gill
Patricia Haile

Board of Directors 2017

Anne Jackson, *Research*
Madeline Lawson
Dr. Richard Lewis
Dorothy Miller, *Treasurer*
Howard Reisinger, *Multi-Media*
Barbara Sethmann, *Secretary/Publications*
Bud Smith

Carl Strock, *First Vice President*
Bryan Taliaferro
Marty Taylor, *Grants*
Byrd Waring
C. Norman Wood

Non-director Committee Heads

David Broad, *Website*
Penny Geiger, *Docents*
Joan Moore, *Education*
Priscilla Vaughan, *Gift Shop*

Museum Staff

Curator/Collections Management David Jett
Administrative Assistant Milly Caven
