

# LIBERTY!

## The Virginia Convention

Williamsburg, May 15, 1776

*"Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!"*

*Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775*

*"Let this happy day give birth to an American republic. Let her arise, not to devastate and to conquer, but to reestablish the reign of peace and of law. The eyes of Europe are fixed upon us: she demands of us a living example of freedom..."*

*Richard Henry Lee*

### **"Virginia Declared Free and Independent State"**

**The struggle for American independence** was fought with more than muskets and bayonets. The Revolution, which began in the hearts and minds of freedom-loving people was also won with powerful words and ideas, such as those born on an oppressively hot day, May 15, 1776. One-hundred eighteen men gathered in the dark, imposing House of Burgesses in the capitol of Williamsburg, Virginia. Farmers, merchants, and craftsmen came from throughout Virginia, the largest and most prosperous of the 13 colonies, to face and indeed to make a grim decision, a decision that would ultimately change the course of history.

Representing freeholders, they prepared to step into open defiance of the most powerful empire in the world. These gentlemen would make the decision to sever all ties with Mother England, thereby becoming their own sovereign country, the first free state in America.

For years, many events had brought Virginia and the other twelve colonies to this point. Following the various disagreements over "taxation without representation," on items such as sugar, tea, stamps, and other "intolerable acts," conflict began. Shots rang out, lives were lost and the King declared that the Colonies were in rebellion.

In the words of Patrick Henry, whose leadership stirred the courage and will of the men of the Virginia Convention, "in this state of extreme danger, we have no alternative left but an abject submission to the will of those overbearing tyrants, or a total separation from the Crown and Government of Great Britain..."

Delegates all had differing opinions. No one knew for sure what the outcome might be. The moment was tense when John Tazewell read the resolves in detail, then called for a vote. No one stirred as he rapped his halberd sharply on the floor, and said in a loud voice. "All those delegates in favor of this resolve for Independence now say aye. Those who oppose say ye, nae." For a moment, not a sound could be heard. Then the ayes rang out in unison. The room erupted with an explosion of cheers and celebration. Fists were raised in the air, and voices cried out for freedom. In the face of each man was the determined look of fervor and conviction. And, with that blow for Liberty, Virginia became free and independent.



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## Who was there?

**Patrick Henry** - orator, statesman, and a leading patriot of the American Revolution. Patrick Henry helped draft the resolution that would declare Virginia free from Great Britain. Earlier, while serving in the Virginia House of Burgesses, Patrick Henry first drew attention to his fiery and impassioned oratory when he denounced the Stamp Act, predicting it would ultimately lead to revolt and the downfall of King George III, saying, "if this be treason, make the most of it."

**John Tazewell** - clerk of the Virginia Convention

**Richard Henry Lee** - leader of the American Revolution, member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, one of 118 delegates to the Virginia Convention. Lee delivered Virginia's Resolution of Independence to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia where it helped lead to the Declaration of Independence.

**Thomas Nelson** - a dispatcher immediately sent to Philadelphia to deliver the Virginia Resolution to the Virginia delegation.



Patrick Henry

### Words to know

**Burgess** - before the Revolution, the name for a representative in the legislature of Virginia, elected by the freeholders

**Freeholder** - a white, Protestant male land owner over the age of 21

**Halberd** - a medieval spear-like weapon later used in colonial times in official proceedings to call an assembly to order

**Resolution** - a formal statement adopted by a group

**Sovereign** - supreme ruler in power; independent of and unlimited by any other

## In Their Own Words:

"Resolved, unanimously, That the Delegates appointed to represent this Colony in General Congress be instructed 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; and that they give the assent of this Colony to such declaration, and to whatever measures may be thought proper and necessary by Congress for forming foreign alliances, and a Confederation of the Colonies, at such time and in the manner as to them shall seem best..."

from the Resolution of the Virginia Convention, May 15, 1776

## What Happened Next?

The resolution was sent to Philadelphia, where groundwork was being laid for the Declaration of Independence, the document that would proclaim America's independence to the world. On June 11, members of the Second Continental Congress appointed a group of five men to write the Declaration of Independence. Committee members were Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman. Jefferson was asked to do the actual writing. The completed document was adopted July 4, 1776. Those words penned on parchment were powerful, but the colonists' liberty had to be won by the blood and sacrifice of many on the battlefield. The American patriots were now fighting for the cause of liberty and independence against the strongest army in the world.

